




PS  
3501  
.I5B7

BOOKS/NDG  
20.00

 **DISCARDED**  
UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG  
PORTAGE & BALMORAL  
WINNIPEG 2, MAN. CANADA



BRING! BRING!  
AND OTHER STORIES



PS  
350  
I5B

# BRING! BRING!

*and*

OTHER STORIES

*by* Potter

CONRAD AIKEN



NEW YORK  
BONI & LIVERIGHT

1925

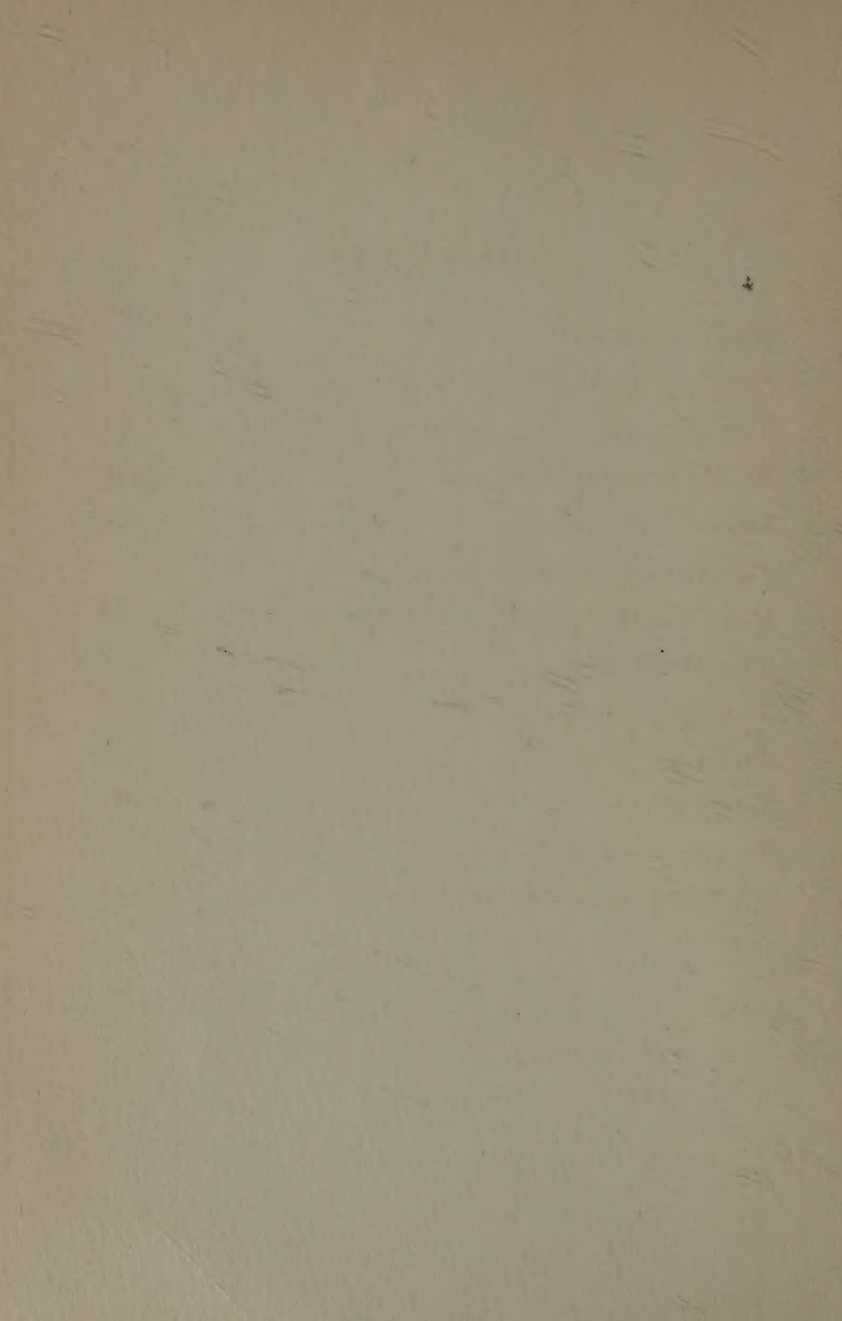
*Copyright 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925, by*  
CONRAD AIKEN

---

*Printed in the United States of America*



To  
MY WIFE



# CONTENTS

	PAGE
BRING! BRING! . . . . .	11
STRANGE MOONLIGHT . . . . .	37
THE DISCIPLE . . . . .	56
BY MY TROTH, NERISSA! . . . . .	93
SMITH AND JONES . . . . .	104
THE ESCAPE FROM FATUITY . . . . .	120
HEY, TAXI! . . . . .	132
THE DARK CITY . . . . .	144
THE ORANGE MOTH . . . . .	158
THE LAST VISIT . . . . .	171
THE LETTER . . . . .	186
THE ANNIVERSARY . . . . .	211
SOLILOQUY ON A PARK BENCH . . . . .	232



BRING! BRING!  
AND OTHER STORIES



# BRING! BRING!

## I.

MISS ROOKER dreamed that she was on board the *Falcon* in Marblehead Harbor. Dr. Fish was uncorking a bottle of champagne, contorting his face grotesquely, his gray mustache pushed up so that it seemed to envelop his red nose. Dr. Harrington, tall and thin in his white flannels, stood beside the gramophone, singing with wide open mouth, his eyes comically upturned towards the low cabin ceiling: his white flannel arm was round Miss Paine's waist. As he sang he seemed to draw her tighter and tighter against his side, his face darkened, Miss Paine began to scream. The cork came out with a loud pop, froth poured onto the napkin. Miss Rooker held out her glass to be filled, and a great blob of champagne froth fell upon the front of her skirt. It was her white duck skirt which buttoned all the way down with large mother-of-pearl buttons. "Oh—Dr. Harrington!" she cried. Dr. Fish reached down a hand to wipe it away—she was transfixed with delight and horror when instead he unbuttoned one of the buttons, at the same time bringing his mustached face very close to hers and intensely smiling. She had no clothes on, and he was touching her knee. Dr. Harrington sang louder, Miss Paine screamed

louder, the gramophone cawed and squealed, and now Dr. Fish was uncorking one bottle after another—pop! pop! pop! She sat in the stern of the tender, trailing one hand in the water of the dark harbor, as they rowed rapidly away from the yacht. Dr. Harrington, slightly drunk, was driving rather recklessly—from side to side of the Boulevard went the car, and Miss Rooker and Dr. Fish were tumbled together: he pinched her side. She would be late—they would be late—long after midnight. The sky was already growing light. Birds began singing. A sparrow, rather large, ridiculously large, opened his mouth wide and started shouting in through her window: “Bring! Bring! Bring! Bring! . . .” She woke at this. A sparrow was chirping noisily in the wild cherry tree outside her window. She was in Duxbury. It was a hot morning in summer. She was “on a case”—Mrs. Oldkirk. Mrs. Oldkirk would be waking and would want her glass of hot milk. Perhaps Mrs. Oldkirk had been calling? She listened. No. Nothing but the sparrows and the crickets. But it was time to get up. Why on earth should she be dreaming, after all this time, of Dr. Harrington and Dr. Fish? Five years ago. Possibly because Mr. Oldkirk reminded her of Dr. Fish. . . . Brushing her black hair before the mirror, and looking into her dark-pupilled brown eyes, she felt melancholy. She was looking very well—very pretty. She sang softly, so as not to disturb Mrs. Oldkirk in the next room: “*And when I told them—how beautiful you were—they wouldn’t be—*”



*lieve—me; they wouldn't be—lieve—me.*" Delicious, a deep cold bath on a sultry morning like this: and to-day the bathing would be good, a high tide about twelve o'clock. Mr. Oldkirk and Miss Lavery would be going in. . . . Miss Lavery was Mrs. Oldkirk's cousin. . . . Well, it really was disgraceful, the way they behaved! Pretending to "keep house" for Mrs. Oldkirk! Did anybody else notice it? And Mr. Oldkirk was very nice looking, she liked his sharp blue eyes, humorous. *"And—when—I—told—them—how beautiful you were—"*

Mrs. Oldkirk was already awake, her hands clasped under her braided hair, her bare white elbows tilted upward.

"Good morning, Miss Rooker," she said languidly.

"Good morning, Mrs. Oldkirk. Did you sleep well?"

"No, it was too hot . . . far too hot . . . even without a sheet. The ice melted in the lemonade. It was disgusting."

"Will you want your hot milk this morning?"

"Oh, yes—certainly. What time is it, Miss Rooker?"

"Just seven-thirty."

All the windows in the house were open, as Miss Rooker passed through the hall and down the stairs. The sea-wind sang softly through the screens, sea-smells and pine-smells, and the hot morning was like a cage full of birds. "Bring! Bring!" the sparrow had shouted—remarkable dream—and here she was, bringing, bringing hot milk on a hot morning, bringing

hot milk to a lazy neurotic woman (rather pretty) who was no more an invalid than she was herself. Why did she want to stay in bed? Why did she want a nurse? A slave would have done as well—there wasn't the slightest occasion for medical knowledge. The massage, of course. But it was very queer. There was something wrong. And Miss Lavery and Mr. Oldkirk were always talking together till past midnight, talking, talking!

Hilda was lighting the fire in the kitchen range, her pale face saturated with sleep, her pale hair untidy. The green shades were still down over the windows, and the kitchen had the air of an aquarium, the oak floor scrubbed white as bone.

"Good morning, Hilda—how was the dance last night?"

"Lovely. . . . But oh, sweet hour, how sleepy I am!"

"You look it. You'll lose your beauty."

"Oh, go on!"

The fire began crackling in the range: small slow curls of blue smoke oozed out round the stove lids. Miss Rooker went to the ice-chest, took out the bottle of milk. Holding it by the neck, she returned upstairs. On the way she saw Mary setting the breakfast table: she, too, looked pale and sleepy, had been to the dance. "*And when I told—them—*" She poured the creamy milk into the aluminum saucepan and lit the alcohol lamp. Then she went to the window and watched the sea-gulls circling over the naked hot

mud flats. Seals sat in rows. On the beach, fringed with eel-grass, near at hand, Mr. Oldkirk's green dory was pulled far up, and rested amid gray matted seaweed.

By the time she had given Mrs. Oldkirk her hot milk, bathed the patient's face and hands and wrists (beautiful wrists, languid and delicate) with cold water, and combed her hair, breakfast was half over . . . Mr. Oldkirk, leaning forward on one elbow, was regarding Miss Lavery with a look humorous and intent. Iced grapefruit.

"Ah, here's Miss Rooker," said Mr. Oldkirk, glancing up at her quizzically, and pulling back her chair with outstretched hand. . . . "Good morning, Miss Rooker. Sit down. We have a problem for you to solve."

Miss Lavery was wearing her pale green satin morning gown. It was becoming to her—oh, quite disgustingly—set off, somehow her long, blue eyes, lazy and liquid, tilted up at the corners a little like a Chinaman's. But far too negligee. The idea of coming down to breakfast like that—with Mr. Oldkirk!

"I'm no good at riddles. Ask me an easy one."

"Oh, this is extremely simple," Mr. Oldkirk said, with just a hint of malice, "merely a question of observation—observation of one's self."

Miss Lavery thought this was very funny—she gave a snort of laughter, and stifled it behind her napkin. Really! thought Miss Rooker—when she leaned for-

ward like that!—with that low, loose morning gown! Scandalous.

“You’re good at observing, Miss Rooker—tell us, how long does a love affair last—a normal, you know, ordinary one, I mean?”

“Well, upon my soul!” cried Miss Rooker. “Is *that* what’s worrying you?”

“Oh, yes, poor man, he’s terribly worried about it.” Miss Lavery snickered, eying Mr. Oldkirk with a gleaming mock derision. “He’s been wrangling with me, all breakfast through, about it.”

“Seriously, Miss Rooker—” he pretended to ignore Miss Lavery—“it’s an important scientific question. And of course a charming young lady like you has had *some* experience of—er—the kind?”

Miss Rooker blushed. She was annoyed, she could not have said exactly why. She was annoyed with both of them: just slightly. Glancing at Mr. Oldkirk (yes, he certainly looked like Dr. Fish) she said shortly:

“You want to know too much.”

Mr. Oldkirk opened his eyes. “Oh!” he said—then again, in a lower tone, “Oh.” He frowned at his plate, breathed densely through his grayish mustache. . . . Then, to Miss Lavery, who had suddenly become rather frigid, and was looking at Miss Rooker just a little impudently:

“Any more coffee, Helen? . . .”

“Not a drop.”

“Damn.” He got up, slow and tall.

“Berty! You shouldn’t swear before Miss Rooker.”

Miss Lavery's words tinkled as coldly and sharply as ice in a pitcher of lemonade. Hateful woman! Were they trying to make her feel like a servant?

"Oh, I'm quite used to it, Miss Lavery. Doctors, you know!"

Miss Lavery, leaning plump, bare elbows on the mahogany table, clasping long, white fingers lightly before her chin, examined Miss Rooker attentively. "Oh, yes, you're used to doctors, of course. They're very immoral, aren't they?"

Miss Rooker turned scarlet, gulped her coffee, while Miss Lavery just perceptibly smiled.

"How's the patient this morning?" Mr. Oldkirk turned around from the long window, where he had been looking out at the bay. "Any change?"

"No. She's the picture of health, as she *always* is." Miss Rooker was downright. "I think she ought to be up."

"That's not my opinion, Miss Rooker, nor the doctor's either."

"Well—"

"She's been ordered a long rest."

"A rest, do you call it! With—" Miss Rooker broke off, angry and helpless.

"With what?" Mr. Oldkirk's tone was inquisitively sharp.

"Oh, well," Miss Rooker sighed, "I don't understand these nervous cases: I suppose I don't. If *I* had *my* way, though, I'd have her up and out before you could say Jack Robinson."

Mr. Oldkirk was dry and decisive.

"That's your opinion, Miss Rooker. You would probably admit that Dr. Hedgley knows a little more about it than you do."

He sauntered out of the dining room, hands in pockets, lazy and powerful.

"Another slice of toast, Miss Rooker? . . ." Miss Lavery asked the question sweetly, touching with one finger the electric toaster. . . .

"No, thank you, Miss Lavery. Not any more."

## II.

"Don't read, Miss Rooker, it's too hot, I can't listen. And I'm so tired of all those he saids and she saids and said he with a wicked smile! It's a tiresome story. Talk to me instead. And bring me a glass of lemonade."

Mrs. Oldkirk turned on her side and smiled lazily. Indolent gray eyes.

"It is hot."

"I suppose you enjoy nursing, Miss Rooker?"

"Oh, yes, it has its ups and downs. Like everything else."

"You get good pay, and massaging keeps your hands soft. You must see lots of interesting things, too."

"Very. You see some very queer things, sometimes. Queer cases. Living as one of the family, you know, in all sorts of out-of-the-way places—"

"I suppose *my* case seems queer to you." Mrs. Oldkirk's eyes were still and candid, profound.

"Well—it does—a little! . . ."

The two women looked at each other, smiling. The brass traveling clock struck eleven. Mary could be heard sweeping the floor in Miss Rooker's room: *swish, swish*.

"It's not so queer when you know about it." She turned her head away, somber.

"No, nothing is, I suppose. Things are only queer seen from the outside."

"Ah, you're unusually wise for a young girl, Miss Rooker! I daresay you've had lots of experience."

Miss Rooker blushed, flattered.

"Do you know a good deal about men?"

"Well—I don't know—it all depends what you mean."

Mrs. Oldkirk yawned, throwing her head back on the pillow. She folded her hands beneath her head, and smiled curiously at the ceiling.

"I mean what damned scoundrels they are . . . though I guess there are a *few* exceptions. . . . You'd better go for your swim, if you're going. . . . Bring me some hot milk at twelve-thirty. . . . No lunch. . . . And I think I'll sit on the balcony for an hour at three. You can ask them to join me there for tea. Iced tea."

"You'd better try a nap."

"Nap! Not much. Bring me that rotten book. I'll read a little."

Miss Rooker, going into her room for the towel, met Mary coming out: a dark sensual face. "Oh, you



dancing girl!" she murmured, and Mary giggled. The hot sea-wind sang through the screen, salt-smelling. She threw the towel over her shoulder and stood for a moment at the window, melancholy, looking past the railed end of the balcony, and over the roof of the veranda. The cherries in the wild cherry tree were dark red and black, nearly ripe. The bay itself looked hot—the lazy small waves flashed hotly and brilliantly, a wide lazy glare of light all the way from the monument hill to the outer beach, of which the white dunes seemed positively to be burning up. Marblehead was better, the sea was colder there, rocks were better than all this horrible mud—the nights were cooler: and there was more life in the harbor. The good old *Falcon!* "Them was happy days"—that was what Dr. Fish was always saying. And Mr. Oldkirk was extraordinarily like him, the same lazy vigorous way of moving about, slow heavy limbs, a kind of slothful grace. She heard his voice. He and Miss Lavery were coming out, the screen door banged, they emerged bare-headed into the heat, going down the shell path to the bathhouse. "Hell infernal," he was saying, opening one hand under the sunlight as one might do to feel a rain—"which reminds me of the girl whose name was Helen Fernald . . . that's what you are: hell infernal." Miss Lavery opened her pongee parasol, and her words were lost under it. She was very graceful—provocatively graceful, and her gait had about it a light inviting freedom, something virginal and at the same time sensuous. She



gave a sudden screech of laughter as they went round the corner of the bathhouse.

"It's not a nursing case at all," she thought, standing before her mirror—"they pay me to amuse her, that's all—or *she* pays me—which is it?" She leaned close to the mirror, regarding her white almost transparent-seeming temples, the full red mouth (she disliked her lower lip, which she had always thought too heavy—pendulous) and the really beautiful dark hair, parted, and turned away from her brow in heavy wings. "*And when I told them—*" Did Mr. Oldkirk like her eyes? That awful word—oh, really dreadful, but so true—Dr. Fish had used about her eyes! But Mr. Oldkirk seemed to like Chinese eyes better. . . . Ought she to stay—just being a kind of lady's maid like this? And it wasn't right. No: it wasn't decent. She would like to say so to their faces. "I think you'd better get another nurse at the end of the week, Mr. Oldkirk—I don't approve of the way things are going on here—no, I don't approve at all. Shameful, that's what it is!—you and Miss Lavery—" But what did she know about him and Miss Lavery? . . . A pang. Misery. They were just cousins. A filthy mind she had, imagining such things. She had heard them talking, talking on the veranda, they went out late at night in the green dory: once, three nights ago, she had thought she heard soft footsteps in the upstairs hall, and a murmur, a long sleepy murmur. . . . "*How beautiful you wer-r-r-r-re.*"

The bathhouse was frightfully hot—like an oven.

It smelt of salt wood and seaweed. She took her clothes off slowly, feeling sand on the boards under her feet. She could hear Miss Lavery moving in the next "cell," occasionally brushing her clothes against the partition or thumping an elbow. Helen Lavery. Probably about thirty—maybe twenty-eight. A social service worker, they said—she'd be a fine social service worker! Going round and pretending to be a fashionable lady. Sly, tricky, disgusting creature! . . . And a one-piece bathing suit, with no stockings! She was too clever to miss any chance like that. Of course, she had a beautiful figure, though her legs were just a shade too heavy. And she used it for all it was worth.

Miss Lavery was already thigh-deep in the water (in the gap between two beds of eel-grass) wading, with a swaying slow grace, towards Mr. Oldkirk, who floated on his back with hardly more than his nose and mustache visible. She skimmed the water with swallow-swift hands, forward and back, as she plunged deeper. "Oo! delicious," she cried, and sank with a soft turmoil, beginning to swim. "Don't bump me," Mr. Oldkirk answered, blowing, "I'm taking a nap."

The sunlight beat like cymbals on the radiant beach. The green dory was almost too hot to touch, but Miss Rooker dragged and pushed it into the water, threw in the anchor, and shoved off. "Look out!" she sang, whacking a blade on the water.

"Hello! Where are you off to, Miss Rooker?" Mr. Oldkirk blew like a seal.

"Marblehead."

"Dangerous place for young ladies, Miss Rooker. Better not stay after dark!"

"Oh, Marblehead's an open book to me!" Miss Rooker was arch.

"Oh, it is, is it!" He gave a loud "Ha!" in the water, blowing bubbles. "Better take me, then!"

He took three vigorous strokes, reached up a black-haired hand to the gunwale, and hauling himself up, deliberately overturned the dory. Miss Rooker screamed, plunged sidelong past Mr. Oldkirk's head (saw him grinning) into the delicious cold shock of water. Down she went, and opening her eyes saw Mr. Oldkirk's green legs and blue body, wavering within reach—she took hold of his cold, hard knee, then flung her arms round his waist, hugged him ecstatically, pulled him under. They became, for a second, deliciously entangled under the water. The top of his head butted her knee, his hand slid across her hip. Then they separated, kicking each other, and rose, both sputtering.

"Trying—woof—to drown me?" he barked, shaking his head from side to side. "A nice trick!"

"*You* did it!" . . . Miss Rooker laughed, excited. She swam on her back, out of breath, looking at Mr. Oldkirk intensely. Had he guessed that there, under the water, she had touched him deliberately? There was something in his eyes—a small sharp gleam as of secret intimacy, a something admitted between them—or was it simply a question? . . . Averting his eyes,

suddenly, he swam to the upturned dory, and began pushing it towards the shore. Miss Lavery, who could not swim well, stood in shallow water, up to her middle, breathlessly ducking up and down. She looked rather ridiculous.

"What *are* you children doing!" she cried, chattering. "I'm cold; I think I'll go in."

Mr. Oldkirk pushed, swimming, thrashing the water with powerful legs. "You ought to be"—he puffed—"damned glad"—he puffed—"to be cold on a day like this"—he puffed—"Helen!" Then he called: "Come on—Miss Rooker! Give me a hand. Too heavy."

She put her hands against one corner of the green bow. The dory moved slowly. It would be easy to touch his legs again—the thought pleased her, she laughed, and, letting her laughing mouth sink below the surface, blew a wild froth of bubbles. Their faces were very close to one another. Miss Lavery, standing and watching, lifted conscious elbows to tuck her hair under her bathing cap.

"You swim like a fish," said Mr. Oldkirk. "Must be a granddaughter of Venus. Was it Venus who came up out of Duxbury Bay on a good-sized clam-shell?"

Miss Rooker laughed, puzzled. Was he flattering, or being sarcastic? . . . What about Venus? . . . "No," she said. "Nothing like that. But, oh, how I do enjoy it!"

In shallow water they righted and emptied the dory, restored the oars. While Mr. Oldkirk, getting into

the boat, began hauling himself out to the anchor, which had fallen in, Miss Rooker climbed the beach toward the bathhouse. Miss Lavery stood before the door, taking off her bathing cap. Her face was hard. She was shivering. She struck her cap against the door jamb, sharply, and gave a little malicious smile.

"I know why you did that!" she said. She stepped in and shut the door.

Miss Rooker stared at the door, furious. Her first impulse was to open the door and shout something savagely injurious. The vixen! the snake! . . . She went into her own room—hot as an oven—and dropped the bathing suit off. Miss Lavery had suspected something. . . . Well, let her suspect. . . . She dried herself slowly with the warm towel, enjoying the beauty of her cool body. Let her suspect! Good for her. . . . Ah, it *had* been delicious! . . . She would let Miss Lavery hear her singing. "*And—when—I—told—them—*" . . .

Five minutes later Miss Lavery banged her door and departed, and Miss Rooker smiled.

### III.

Mrs. Oldkirk, languid and pretty in her pink crepe-de-chine dressing gown, leaned back in her wicker chair resting her head on the tiny pillow and closed her eyes. Her silver-embroidered slippers, with blue pom-poms, were crossed on the foot stool. The magazine had fallen from her hand. "Oh, how heavenly," she

murmured. "Nothing as heavenly as a scalp massage. . . . You're very skilful, Miss Rooker. You have the touch. . . . Not so much on the top, now—a little more at the sides, and down the neck. . . ."

Miss Rooker, standing behind the wicker chair, stared over her patient's head into the dressing-table mirror. Massage. Massage. It was insufferably hot. The breeze had dropped. She felt drowsy. Zeek—zeek—zeek—zeek sang the crickets in the hot grass under the afternoon sun. The long seething trill of a cicada died languidly away—in a tree, she supposed. She remembered seeing a locust attacked by a huge striped bee—or was it a wasp? They had fallen together to the ground, in the dry grass, and the heavy bee, on top, curving its tail malevolently, stung the gray-pleated upturned belly, the poor creature shrilling and spinning all the while. Then the bee—or wasp—had zoomed away, and the gray locust, color of ashes, spun on its back a little and lay still. . . . Down the smooth soft neck. A curved pressure over and behind the ears. What was the matter with Mrs. Oldkirk? Too young for change of life—no. Something mysterious. She was very pretty, in her soft lazy supercilious way, and had a queer rich indifferent-seeming personality. A loose screw somewhere—too bad. Or was it that she was—Mrs. Oldkirk yawned.

"I love to feel someone fooling about my head: the height of luxury. When I go to the hairdresser I feel like staying all day. I'd like to pay them to keep



on for hours. Especially if it's a man! Something thrilling about having your hair done by a man. Don't you know—? It tickles you all over."

Miss Rooker laughed, embarrassed. Singular remark! "Yes—" she answered slowly, as if with uncertainty. "I think I know what you mean."

"I'm sure you do—you haven't those naughty black eyes for nothing, Miss Rooker! Ha, ha!"

"Oh, well, I suppose I'm human." Miss Rooker snickered. *Were* her eyes "naughty"? She wanted to study them in the glass, but was afraid that Mrs. Oldkirk would be watching. Zeek—zeek—zeek—zeek—sang the crickets. What were they doing, where were they now? Was Miss Lavery taking a nap? Were they out in the car? . . . Her arms were beginning to be tired.

"Tell me, Miss Rooker, as woman to woman—what do you think of men?" Mrs. Oldkirk opened her gray eyes, lazily smiling.

"Well—I like them very much, if that's what you mean."

"I suppose so! You're still young. How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Twenty-four."

"Ah, yes. Very young. Lucky girl. . . . But you wait fourteen years! *Then* see what you think of men."

"Do they seem so different?"

"They don't seem, my dear girl, they *are*. It's when you're young that they *seem*. Later on, you begin to

understand them—you get their number. And then—oh, my God—you want to exterminate the whole race of them. The nasty things!”

Miss Rooker felt herself blushing.

“Oh, I’m sure they aren’t as bad as all that!”

“Devil’s advocate! Miss Rooker. . . . Don’t try to defend them. . . . They’re all rotten. . . . Oh, I don’t mean that there isn’t a dear old parson here and there, you know—but then you remember the words of the song—‘Even staid old country preachers are engaging tango teachers.’ You can’t get away from it! . . . No, the man doesn’t live that I’d trust with a lead nickel. . . . By which, however, I don’t mean that I don’t enjoy having my hair done by a man! Ha, ha!” . . . Mrs. Oldkirk gave a queer little laugh, flaccid and bitter. She looked at herself, with parted lips, in the mirror: a distant sort of scrutiny, slightly contemptuous. Then, relaxing, she added: “Take my advice—don’t ever marry. It’s a snare and a delusion.”

“Why, I should *love* to marry!”

“Oh, you would! . . . In that case all I can say is I hope you’ll have better luck than *I* did. . . .”

Miss Rooker was silent, confused.

“Tell me, has Berty, my husband—been flirting with you? Don’t be afraid to be frank—it doesn’t matter, you know!”

“Why, no—he hasn’t.”

“You probably wouldn’t tell me if he had. But if he hasn’t yet he will. . . . Give him time!”



"Good heavens! What a thing to say!"

"Do I shock you? . . . I know him like the alphabet! . . . poor old satyr."

"You seem to!"

"Ah, I do. . . . Absolutely no principles—not a principle. There's only one thing in Bertie I've never been able to understand; and that's his dislike of Miss Lavery. Ha, ha! That's why I have Miss Lavery keep house for me."

Mrs. Oldkirk closed her eyes again, faintly smiling. To say such things to her, a stranger! What was the matter with her? Miss Rooker was appalled at the indiscretion. . . . And Mr. Oldkirk and Miss Lavery going out in the dory at midnight, and talking, talking, long after everyone else had gone to bed. . . . And that footstep in the hall, and the long affectionate murmur—surely Miss Lavery's voice? . . . It was all extraordinary. She had never been in such a queer place. She thought of the incident in the water, and then of Miss Lavery banging her rubber cap against the door, and saying, "I know why you did that!" . . . Well, Mrs. Oldkirk could sneer at Bertie all she liked; but for *her* part—

"I think that's enough, thank you, Miss Rooker. . . . You didn't forget about the iced tea, did you?"

"No."

"Do you know where Mr. Oldkirk and Miss Lavery are?"

"No—I think Miss Lavery's lying down."

"Well—three-thirty. . . . Would you mind picking up my magazine? It's fallen down. . . ."

. . . Miss Rooker descended the shell path and sauntered along the hot beach. She sank down on the dry bedded seaweed in the shadow of the bluff. The seaweed was still warm, and smelt strongly of the sea . . . zeek—zeek—zeek—zeek. . . . So her eyes were naughty, were they! Perhaps they had more effect than she knew. She smiled. Perhaps Mr. Oldkirk—her heart was beating violently, she opened her book, for a delicious moment the type swam beneath her eyes.

#### IV.

"Good-night," said Miss Rooker. As she switched off the light, and shut the door the brass traveling clock began striking ten. She went down the stairs, carrying the tray. The lamp on the sitting-room table was lighted, a book was open, there was a smell of cigarette smoke, but nobody was there. The warm wind sang through the screens, fluttered the pages of the book. Where were they? She felt depressed. It was horrible—horrible! She wouldn't stand it—not another day. Not another hour. . . . "Mr. Oldkirk, I want to speak to you: I feel that I can't stay on here. . . ." Would he try to persuade her to stay? Ah! perhaps he wouldn't. . . . They were probably on the beach—not on the veranda, anyway, or she would hear them. She carried the tray into the kitchen, pushing open the swing door. Mary and Hilda

were standing close together at one of the windows looking out into the night. Hilda was giggling. They were watching something, standing still and tense.

"He is—he is—" said Mary in a low excited voice—"he's kissing her. You can see their heads go together."

"Well, what do you know." Hilda's drawl was full of wonder. "Sweet hour! . . . I wouldn't mind it much myself."

"Look! Do you see?"

Miss Rooker let go of the swing door: it shut with a thump, and the two girls started. Hilda's face was scarlet, Mary was saturnine.

"Who's kissing who?" asked Miss Rooker, looking angrily from one to the other. Hilda, still blushing, and putting back a strand of pale hair from her moist forehead, answered, embarrassed:

"It's Mr. Oldkirk and Miss Lavery, miss."

"Oh! And do you think it's nice to be spying on them?"

"We weren't spying—if they do it right on the beach, in the bright moonlight, it's *their* lookout."

Miss Rooker put down the tray and walked back to the sitting room. Her temples were throbbing. What ought she to do? It was disgraceful—before the servants like this! Shameful. She would do something—she *must*. She went out to the veranda, banging the screen door very loudly. Perhaps they would hear it, though she half hoped they wouldn't. She went down the path, and as she got to the beach, with its moonlit

seaweed, she began whistling, and walking towards the dory. What was she going to say? She didn't know. Something. Something short and angry. The moonlight showed them quite clearly—they must have heard her coming, for Mr. Oldkirk was striking a match and lighting a cigarette, and they had moved apart. They were sitting against the dory.

"Why, it's Miss Rooker!" cried Mr. Oldkirk. "Come and bask in the moonlight, Miss Rooker."

She looked down at them, feeling her lips very dry.

"I felt I ought to tell you that the servants are watching you," she said. There was a silence—dreadful. Then, as Mr. Oldkirk said, "Oh!" and began scrambling to his feet, she turned and walked away. . . . That would teach them! That would give that hateful woman something to think about!

In the sitting room she sat down by the table, sank her forehead in her hands and pretended to be reading. What was going to happen? The screen door banged and Miss Lavery stood in the hall, under the light.

"Miss Rooker," she said. Her voice shook a little. Miss Rooker rose and moved slowly toward her, a little pleased to observe the whiteness of her face.

"What is it?"

"You're a dirty spy," was the low answer, and Miss Lavery, turning, went calmly up the stairs. She could think of nothing to say—nothing! . . . She burned. Anyone would suppose it was *she* who was in the wrong! . . . She sat down again, holding the book

on her knee. . . . She would like to kill that woman! . . . Where was Mr. Oldkirk? She must see Mr. Oldkirk and tell him to his face—she would say that she was leaving tomorrow. Yes—tomorrow! By the nine-fifteen. They would have to get another nurse. Horrible! She discovered that she was trembling. What was she trembling for? She was angry, that was all, angry and excited—she wasn't afraid. Afraid of what? Mr. Oldkirk? Absurd! . . . She began reading. The words seemed large, cold and meaningless, the sentences miles apart. "Said she, he said, and said she, smiling cruelly." Zeek—zeek—zeek—zeek—zeek—those damned crickets! Where, where in God's name was Mr. Oldkirk? . . . Should she saunter out and meet him on the beach? No. He would put two and two together. He would remember her touching him in the water. She must wait—pretend to be reading. "The blind man put out his white, extraordinarily sensitive hand, his hand that was conscious as . . . eyes are conscious. He touched her face, and she shrank. His forefinger felt for the scar along the left side of her jaw and ran lightly, it seemed almost hysterically, over it—with hysterical joy. 'Marie!' he cried—'it's little Marie! . . .'" How perfectly ridiculous. . . . And to think of Mrs. Oldkirk, all the time thinking that Berty disliked Miss Lavery! That was the limit. Yes, the absolute limit. "That's why I have her keep house for me." But did she, perhaps, know it all the time? . . . Ah! . . . She

was sly, Mrs. Oldkirk! . . . It was possible—it was perfectly possible. . . . Extraordinary house!

She heard footsteps on the veranda. She sprang up, switched off the light, leaving the sitting room in comparative darkness. She'd meet him in the hall—She took two steps, and then, as the door slammed, stopped. No. She saw him standing, tall and indolent, just inside the door. He peered, wrinkling his forehead, in her direction, apparently not seeing her.

"Miss Rooker—are you there?"

"Yes."

He came into the dark room, and she took an uncertain step towards him. He stopped, they faced each other, and there was a pause. He stood against the lighted doorway, huge and silhouetted.

"I wanted to speak to you"—his voice was embarrassed and gentle—"and I wanted to wait till Miss Lavery had gone to bed."

"Oh."

"Yes. . . . I wanted to apologize to you. It must have been very distressing for you."

"Oh, not at all, I assure you. . . . Not in the least." Her voice was a little faint—she put her hand against the edge of the table.

"I'm sure it was. Please forgive me. . . . Miss Lavery, you know—" He gave a queer uneasy laugh, as if there was something he wanted to say but couldn't. What was it—was it that Miss Lavery was the one? She felt, suddenly, extraordinarily happy.



"I think I'd better leave tomorrow," she answered then, looking away. "I think it would be better."

"Nonsense, my dear Miss Rooker! Don't think of it. . . . Why should you?"

Her heart was beating so violently that she could hardly think. She heard him breathing heavily and quickly.

"Well," she said, "I think it would be better."

"Why? There's no earthly reason. . . . No." As she made no reply, he went on—"It won't happen again—I can promise you *that!*" He again laughed, but this time as if he were thinking of something else, thinking of something funny that was going to happen. . . . Was he laughing at Miss Lavery?

Miss Rooker, unsteady, took a step to pass him, but he put out his hand. It closed upon her wrist. With his other hand he took slow possession of hers. She drew back, but only a little.

"Please," she said.

"Please what?"

"Let me go."

"Only when you've given me a promise."

"What?"

"That you'll stay here—with *me*."

"Oh—you know I can't!"

She was trembling, and was ashamed to know that his hands must feel her trembling.

"Promise!" he said. She looked up at him—his eyes were wide, dark, beautiful, full of intention.

"Very well, I promise."

"Good! Good girl. . . ." He did not let go of her hand and wrist. "I'll make it up to you. . . . Don't mind Miss Lavery!"

"You *are* dreadful!" She gave a laugh, her self-possession coming back to her.

"*Am* I?" He beamed. "Well, I am, sometimes! . . . But what about you?"

"Oh, I'm awful!" she answered. She drew away her hand, rather slowly, reluctantly. "Good-night, then."

"Good-night."

She turned on the landing to look down at him. He smiled, his humorous eyes twinkling, and she smiled in return. . . . Heavens! how extraordinary, how simply extraordinary, how perfectly extraordinary. . . . She stared at her reflection in the glass. "Naughty" eyes? No—they were beautiful. She had never looked so beautiful—never. . . . Perhaps he would knock at her door? She locked it. . . . She combed her hair, and as she did so, began humming, "*And—when—I—told—them—*" Then she remembered Mrs. Oldkirk in the next room, and stopped. Poor old thing! . . . She got into bed and lay still, smiling. The wind whispered in the screen, the crickets were singing louder than ever. They liked a hot night like this. Zeek—zeek. Mr. Oldkirk passed along the hall. . . . Ah, the nice tall man with nice eyes, the very, very nice man! . . .



## STRANGE MOONLIGHT

### I.

IT had been a tremendous week—colossal. Its reverberations around him hardly yet slept—his slightest motion or thought made a vast symphony of them, like a breeze in a forest of bells. In the first place, he had filched a volume of Poe's tales from his mother's bookcase, and had had in consequence a delirious night in inferno. Down, down he had gone with heavy clangs about him, coiling spouts of fire licking dryly at an iron sky, and a strange companion, of protean shape and size, walking and talking beside him. For the most part, this companion seemed to be nothing but a voice and a wing—an enormous jagged black wing, soft and drooping like a bat's; he had noticed veins in it. As for the voice, it had been singularly gentle. If it was mysterious, that was no doubt because he himself was stupid. Certainly it had sounded placid and reasonable, exactly, in fact, like his father's explaining a problem in mathematics; but, though he had noticed the orderly and logical structure, and felt the inevitable approach towards a vast and beautiful or terrible conclusion, the nature and meaning of the conclusion itself always escaped him. It was as if,

always, he had come just too late. When, for example, he had come at last to the black wall that inclosed the infernal city, and seen the arched gate, the voice had certainly said that if he hurried he would see, through the arch, a far, low landscape of extraordinary wonder. He had hurried, but it had been in vain. He had reached the gate, and for the tiniest fraction of an instant he had even glimpsed the wide green of fields and trees, a winding blue ribbon of water, and a gleam of intense light touching to brilliance some far object. But then, before he had time to notice more than that every detail in this fairy landscape seemed to lead towards a single shining solution, a dazzling significance, suddenly the infernal rain, streaked fire and rolling smoke, had swept it away. Then the voice had seemed to become ironic. He had failed, and he felt like crying.

He had still, the next morning, felt that he might, if the opportunity offered, see that vision. It was always just round the corner, just at the head of the stairs, just over the next page. But other adventures had intervened. Prize-day, at school, had come upon him as suddenly as a thunderstorm—the ominous hushed gathering of the entire school into one large room, the tense air of expectancy, the solemn speeches, all had reduced him to a state of acute terror. There was something unintelligible and sinister about it. He had, from first to last, a peculiar physical sensation that something threatened him, and here and there, in the interminable vague speeches, a word seemed to

have eyes and to stare at him. His prescience had been correct—abruptly his name had been called, he had walked unsteadily amid applause to the teacher's desk, had received a small black pasteboard box; and then had cowered in his chair again, with the blood in his temples beating like gongs. When it was over, he had literally run away—he didn't stop till he reached the park. There, among the tombstones (the park had once been a graveyard) and trumpet-vines he sat on the grass and opened the box. He was dazzled. The medal was of gold, and rested on a tiny blue satin cushion. His name was engraved on it—yes, actually cut into the gold; he felt the incisions with his fingernail. It was an experience not wholly to be comprehended. He put the box down in the grass and detached himself from it, lay full length, resting his chin on his wrist, and stared first at a tombstone and then at the small gold object, as if to discover the relation between them. Humming-birds, tombstones, trumpet-vines, and a gold medal. Amazing. He unpinned the medal from its cushion, put the box in his pocket, and walked slowly homeward, carrying the small, live, gleaming thing between fingers and thumb as if it were a bee. This was an experience to be carefully concealed from mother and father. Possibly he would tell Mary and John. . . . Unfortunately, he met his father as he was going in the door, and was thereafter drowned, for a day, in a glory without significance. He felt ashamed, and put the medal away in a drawer, sternly forbidding Mary and John to

look at it. Even so, he was horribly conscious of it—its presence there burned him unceasingly. Nothing afforded escape from it, not even sitting under the peach tree and whittling a boat.

## II.

The oddest thing was the way these and other adventures of the week all seemed to unite, as if they were merely aspects of the same thing. Everywhere lurked that extraordinary hint of the enigma and its shining solution. On Tuesday morning, when it was pouring with rain, and he and Mary and John were conducting gigantic military operations in the back hall, with hundreds of paper soldiers, tents, cannon, battle-ships, and forts, suddenly through the tall open window, a goldfinch flew in from the rain, beat wildly against a pane of glass, darted several times to and fro above their heads, and finally, finding the open window, flashed out. It flew to the peach tree, rested there for a moment, and then over the outhouse and away. He saw it rising and falling in the rain. This was beautiful—it was like the vision in the infernal city, like the medal in the grass. He found it impossible to go on with the Battle of Gettysburg and abandoned it to Mary and John, who instantly started to quarrel. Escape was necessary, and he went into his own room, shut the door, lay on his bed, and began thinking about Caroline Lee.

John Lee had taken him there to see his new air-gun and a bag of BB shot. The strange house was dim and

exciting. A long winding dark staircase went up from near the front door, a clock was striking in a far room, a small beautiful statue of a lady, slightly pinkish, and looking as if it had been dug out of the earth, stood on a table. The wall paper beside the staircase was rough and hairy. Upstairs, in the playroom they found Caroline, sitting on the floor with a picture book. She was learning to read, pointing at the words with her finger. He was struck by the fact that, although she was extraordinarily strange and beautiful, John Lee did not seem to be aware of it and treated her as if she were quite an ordinary sort of person. This gave him courage, and after the air-gun had been examined, and the bag of BB shot emptied of its gleaming heavy contents and then luxuriously refilled, he told her some of the words she couldn't make out. "And what's this?" she had said—he could still hear her say it, quite clearly. She was thin, smaller than himself, with dark hair and large pale eyes, and her forehead and hands looked curiously transparent. He particularly noticed her hands when she brought her five-dollar gold piece to show him, opening a little jewel box which had in it also a necklace of yellow beads from Egypt and a pink shell from Tybee Beach. She gave him the gold piece to look at, and while he was looking at it put the beads round her neck. "Now, I'm an Egyptian!" she said, and laughed shyly, running her fingers to and fro over the smooth beads. A fearful temptation came upon him. He coveted the gold piece, and thought that it would be easy to steal

it. He shut his hand over it and it was gone. If it had been John's, he might have done so, but, as it was, he opened his hand again and put the gold piece back in the box. Afterwards, he stayed for a long while, talking with John and Caroline. The house was mysterious and rich, and he hadn't at all wanted to go out of it, or back to his own humdrum existence. Besides, he liked to hear Caroline talking.

But although he had afterwards for many days wanted to go back to that house, to explore further its dim rich mysteriousness, and had thought about it a great deal, John hadn't again suggested a visit, and he himself had felt a curious reluctance about raising the subject. It had been, apparently, a vision that was not to be repeated, an incursion into a world that was so beautiful and strange that one was permitted of it only the briefest of glimpses. He had, almost, to reassure himself that the house was really there, and for that reason he made rather a point of walking home from school with John Lee. Yes, the house was there—he saw John climb the stone steps and open the huge green door. There was never a sign of Caroline, however, nor any mention of her: until one day he heard from another boy that she was ill with scarlet fever, and observed that John had stayed away from school. The news didn't startle or frighten him. On the contrary, it seemed just the sort of romantic privilege in which such fortunate people would indulge. He felt a certain delicacy about approaching the house, however, to see if the red quarantine sign



had been affixed by the door, and carefully avoided Gordon Square on his way home from school. Should he write her a letter or send her a present of marbles? For neither action did there seem to be sufficient warrant. But he found it impossible to do nothing, and later in the afternoon, by a very circuitous route which took him past the county jail—where he was thrilled by actually seeing a prisoner looking out between the gray iron bars—he slowly made his way to Gordon Square and from a safe distance, more or less hiding himself behind a palmetto tree, looked for a long while at the wonderful house, and saw, sure enough, the red sign.

Three days later he heard that Caroline Lee was dead. The news stunned him. Surely it could not be possible? He felt stifled, frightened, and incredulous. In a way, it was just what one would expect of Caroline, but none the less he felt outraged. How was it possible for anyone, whom one actually knew, to *die*? Particularly anyone so vividly and beautifully remembered! The indignity, the horror, of death obsessed him. *Had* she actually died? He went again to Gordon Square, not knowing precisely what it was that he expected to find, and saw something white hanging by the green door. But if, as it appeared, it was true that Caroline Lee, somewhere inside the house, lay dead, lay motionless, how did it happen that he, who was so profoundly concerned, had not at all been consulted, had not been invited to come and talk with her, and now found himself so utterly and hope-

lessly and forever excluded—from the house, as from her? This was a thing which he could not understand. As he walked home, pondering it, he thought of the five-dollar gold piece. What would become of it? Probably John would get it, and, if so, he would steal it from him. . . . All the same, he was glad he hadn't taken it.

To this reflection he came back many times, as now once more with the Battle of Gettysburg raging in the next room. If he had actually taken it, what a horror it would have been! As it was, the fact that he had resisted the temptation, restored the gold piece to the box, seemed to have been a tribute to Caroline's beauty and strangeness. Yes, for nobody else would he have made the refusal—nobody on earth. But, for her, it had been quite simple, a momentary pang quickly lost in the pleasure of hearing her voice, watching her pale hands twisting the yellow beads, and helping her with her reading. "And what's this?" she had said, and "Now I'm an Egyptian!" . . . What was death that could put an end to a clear voice saying such things? . . . Mystery was once more about him, the same mystery that had shone in the vision of the infernal city. There was something beautiful which he could not understand. He had felt it while he was lying in the grass among the tombstones, looking at the medal; he had felt it when the goldfinch darted in from the rain and then out again. All these things seemed in some curious way to fit together.



## III.

The same night, after he had gone to bed, this feeling of enormous and complicated mystery came upon him again with oppressive weight. He lay still, looking from his pillow through the tall window at the moonlight on the white outhouse wall, and again it seemed to him that the explanation for everything was extraordinarily near at hand if he could only find it. The mystery was like the finest of films, like the moonlight on the white wall. Surely, beneath it, there was something solid and simple. He heard someone walk across the yard, with steps that seemed astoundingly far apart and slow. The steps ceased, a door creaked. Then there was a cough. It was old Selena, the negro cook, going out for wood. He heard the sticks being piled up, then the creak of the door again, and again the slow steps on the hard baked ground of the yard, æons apart. How did the peach tree look in the moonlight? Would its leaves be dark, or shiny? And the chinaberry tree? He thought of the two trees standing there motionless in the moonlight, and at last felt that he must get out of bed and look at them. But when he had reached the hall, he heard his mother's voice from downstairs, and he went and lay on the old sofa in the hall, listening. Could he have heard aright? His mother had just called his father "Boy"! Amazing!

"But two parties in a week, Tom—surely that's not excessive?"

"It's two parties *every* week, and sometimes three or four, that's excessive. You know it is."

"Darling, I *must* have *some* recreation!"

His father laughed in a peculiar angry way that he had never heard before—as strange, indeed, as his mother's tone had been.

"Recreation's all right," he said, "but you're neglecting your family. If it goes on, I'll have another child—that's all."

He got off the sofa and went softly down the stairs to the turn of the railing. He peered over the banisters with infinite caution, and what he saw filled him with horror. His mother was sitting on his father's knee, with her arms about his neck. She was kissing him. How awful! . . . He couldn't look at it. What on earth, he wondered as he climbed back into bed, was it all about? There was something curious in the way they were talking, something not at all like fathers and mothers, but more like children, though he couldn't in the least understand it. At the same time, it was offensive.

He began to make up a conversation with Caroline Lee. She was sitting under the peach tree with him, reading her book. What beautiful hands she had! They were transparent, somehow, like her forehead, and her dark hair and large pale eyes delighted him. Perhaps she *was* an Egyptian!

"It must be nice to live in your house," he said.

"Yes, it's very nice. And you haven't seen half of it, either."

"No, I haven't. I'd like to see it all. I liked the hairy wall paper and the pink statue of the lady on the table. Are there any others like it?"

"Oh, yes, lots and lots! In the secret room downstairs, where you heard the silver clock striking, there are fifty other statues, all more beautiful than that one, and a collection of clocks of every kind."

"Is your father very rich?"

"Yes, he's richer than anybody. He has a special carved ivory box to keep his collars in."

"What does it feel like to die—were you sorry?"

"Very sorry! But it's really quite easy—you just hold your breath and shut your eyes."

"Oh!"

"And when you're lying there, after you've died, you're really just pretending. You keep very still, and you have your eyes *almost* shut, but really you know everything! You watch the people and listen to them."

"But don't you want to talk to them, or get out of bed, or out of your coffin?"

"Well, yes, at first you do—but it's nicer than being alive."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know! You understand everything so easily!"

"How nice that must be!"

"It is."

"But after they've shut you up in a coffin and sung songs over you and carried you to Bonaventure

and buried you in the ground, and you're down there in the dark with all that earth above you—isn't that horrible?"

"Oh, no! . . . As soon as nobody is looking, when they've all gone home to tea, you just get up and walk away. You climb out of the earth just as easily as you'd climb out of bed."

"That's how you're here now, I suppose."

"Of course!"

"Well, it's very nice."

"It's lovely. . . . Don't I look just as well as ever?"

"Yes, you do."

There was a pause, and then Caroline said:

"I know you wanted to steal my gold piece—I was awfully glad when you put it back. If you had asked me for it, I'd have given it to you."

"I like you very much, Caroline. Can I come to Bonaventure and play with you?"

"I'm afraid not. You'd have to come in the dark."

"But I could bring a lantern."

"Yes, you could do that."

. . . It seemed to him that they were no longer sitting under the peach tree, but walking along the white shell-road to Bonaventure. He held the lantern up beside a chinquapin tree, and Caroline reached up with her pale, small hands and picked two chinquapins. Then they crossed the little bridge, walking carefully between the rails on the sleepers. Mossy trees were all about them; the moss, in long festoons, hung lower and lower, and thicker and thicker, and the wind made

a soft, seething sound as it sought a way through the gray ancient forest.

## IV.

It had been his intention to explore, the next morning, the vault under the mulberry tree in the park—his friend Harry had mentioned that it was open, and that one could go down very dusty steps and see, on the dark floor, a few rotted boards and a bone or two. At breakfast he enlisted Mary and John for the expedition; but then there were unexpected developments. His father and mother had abruptly decided that the whole family would spend the day at Tybee Beach. This was festive and magnificent beyond belief. The kitchen became a turmoil. Selena ran to and fro with sugar-sandwiches, pots of deviled ham, cookies, hard-boiled eggs and a hundred other things; piles of beautiful sandwiches were exquisitely folded up in shining, clean napkins, and the wicker basket was elaborately packed. John and Mary decided to take their pails with them, and stamped up and downstairs, banging the pails with the shovels. He himself was a little uncertain what to take. He stood by his desk wondering. He would like to take Poe's tales, but that was out of the question, for he wasn't supposed to have the book at all. Marbles, also, were dismissed as unsuitable. He finally took his gold medal out of its drawer and put it in his pocket. He would keep it a secret, of course.

All the way to the station he was conscious of the

medal burning in his pocket. He closed his fingers over it, and again felt it to be a live thing, as if it were buzzing, beating invisible wings. Would his fingers have a waxy smell, as they did after they'd been holding a June bug, or tying a thread to one of its legs? . . . Father carried the basket, Mary and John clanked their pails, everybody was talking and laughing. They climbed into the funny, undignified little train, which almost immediately was lurching over the wide, green marshes, rattling over red iron bridges enormously complicated with girders and trusses. Great excitement when they passed the gray stone fort, Fort Perlaski. They'd seen it once from the river, when they were on the steamer going to the cotton islands. His father leaned down beside Mary to tell her about Fort Perlaski, just as a cloud shadow, crossing it, made it somber. How nice his father's smile was! He had never noticed it before. It made him feel warm and shy. He looked out at the interminable green marshes, the flying clouds of rice-birds, the channels of red water lined with red mud, and listened intently to the strange complex rhythm of the wheels on the rails and the prolonged melancholy wail of the whistle. How curious it all was! His mother was sitting opposite him, very quiet, her gray eyes turned absently toward the window. She wasn't looking at things—she was thinking. If she had been looking at things her eyes would have moved to and fro, as Mary's were doing.

"Mother," he said, "did you bring our bathing suits?"



"Yes, dear."

The train was rounding a curve and slowing down. They had suddenly left the marshes and were among low sand dunes covered with tall grass. He saw a man, very red-faced, just staggering over the top of one of the dunes and waving a stick. . . . It was hot. They filed slowly off the train and one by one jumped down into the burning sand. How strange it was to walk in! They laughed and shrieked, feeling themselves helpless, ran and jumped, straddled up the steep root-laced sides of dunes and slid down again in slow, warm avalanches of lazy sand. Mother and father, picking their way between the dunes, walked slowly ahead, carrying the basket between them—his father pointed at something. The sunlight came down heavily like sheets of solid brass and they could feel the heat of the sand on their cheeks. Then at last they came out onto the enormous white dazzling beach with its millions of shells, its black and white striped light-house, and the long, long sea, indolently blue, spreading out slow, soft lines of foam, and making an interminable rushing murmur like trees in a wind.

He felt instantly a desire, in all this space and light, to run for miles and miles. His mother and father sat under a striped parasol. Mary and John, now barefooted, had begun laborious and intense operations in the sand at the water's edge, making occasional sallies into the sliding water. He began walking away along the beach close to the waves, keeping his eye out for any particularly beautiful shell, and taking

great care not to step on jelly fish. Suppose a school of flying fish, such as he had seen from the ship, should swim in close to the beach and then, by mistake, fly straight up onto the sand? How delightful that would be! It would be almost as exciting as finding buried treasure, a rotten chest full of gold pieces and seaweed and sand. He had often dreamt of thrusting his hand into such a sea-chest and feeling the small, hard, beautiful coins mixed with sand and weed. Some people said that Captain Kidd had buried treasure on Tybee Beach. Perhaps he'd better walk a little closer to the dunes, where it was certainly more likely that treasure would have been hidden. . . . He climbed a hot dune, taking hold of the feathery grass, scraping his bare legs on the coarse leaves, and filling his shoes with warm sand. The dune was scooped at the top like a volcano, the hollow all ringed with tall, whistling grass, a natural hiding-place, snug and secret. He lay down, made excessively smooth a hand's breadth of sand, then took the medal out of his pocket and placed it there. It blazed beautifully. Was it as nice as the five-dollar gold piece would have been? He liked especially the tiny links of the little gold chains by which the shield hung from the pin-bar. If only Caroline could see it! Perhaps if he stayed here, hidden from the family, and waited till they had gone back home, Caroline would somehow know where he was and come to him as soon as it was dark. He wasn't quite sure what would be the shortest way from Bonaventure, but Caroline would know—certainly. Then



they would spend the night here, talking. He would exchange his medal for the five-dollar gold piece, and perhaps she would bring, folded in a square of silk, the little pink statue. . . . Thus equipped, their house would be perfect. . . . He would tell her about the goldfinch interrupting the Battle of Gettysburg.

## v.

The chief event of the afternoon was the burial of his father, who had on his bathing suit. He and Mary and John all excitedly labored at this. When they had got one leg covered, the other would suddenly burst heavily out, or an arm would shatter its mold, and his father would laugh uproariously. Finally they had him wholly buried, all except his head, in a beautiful smooth mound. On top of this they put the two pails, a lot of pink shells in a row, like the buttons of a coat, and a collection of seaweeds. Mother, lying under her parasol, laughed lazily, deliciously. For the first time during the day she seemed to be really happy. She began pelting small shells at father, laughing in an odd, delightful, teasing way, as if she was a girl, and father pretended to be furious. How exactly like a new grave he looked! It was singularly as Caroline had described it, for there he was all alive in it, and talking, and able to get up whenever he liked. Mary and John, seeing mother throw shells, and hearing her teasing laughter, and father's comic rage, became suddenly excited. They began throwing things wildly—shells, handfuls of seaweed, and at

last sand. At this, father suddenly leapt out of his tomb, terrifying them, scattered his grave clothes in every direction, and galloped gloriously down the beach into the sea. The upturned brown soles of his feet followed him casually into a long, curling green wave, and then his head came up shaking like a dog's and blowing water, and his strong white arms flashed slowly over and over in the sunlight as he swam far out. How magnificent! . . . He would like to be able to do that, to swim out and out and out, with a sea-gull flying close beside him, talking.

Later, when they had changed into their clothes again in the salty-smelling wooden bathhouse, they had supper on the veranda of the huge hotel. A band played, the colored waiters bowed and grinned. The sky turned pink, and began to dim; the sea darkened, making a far sorrowful sound; and twilight deepened slowly, slowly into night. The moon, which had looked like a white thin shell in the afternoon, turned now to the brightest silver, and he thought, as they walked silently towards the train, of which they could see the long row of yellow windows, that the beach and dunes looked more beautiful by moonlight than by sunlight. . . . How mysterious the flooded marshes looked, too, with the cold moon above them! They reminded him of something, he couldn't remember what. . . . Mary and John fell asleep in the train; his father and mother were silent. Someone in the car ahead was playing a concertina, and the plaintive sound mingled curiously with the clacking of the rails, the rattle of bridges, the long, lugubrious cry of the

whistle. Hoo-o! Hoo-oo! Where was it they were going—was it to anything so simple as home, the familiar house, the two familiar trees, or were they, rather, speeding like a fiery comet toward the world's edge, to plunge out into the unknown and fall down and down forever?

No, certainly it was not to the familiar. . . . Everything was changed and ghostly. The long street, in the moonlight, was like a deep river, at the bottom of which they walked, making scattered, thin sounds on the stones, and listening intently to the whisperings of elms and palmettos. And their house, when at last they stopped before it, how strange it was! The moonlight, falling through the two tall swaying oaks, cast a moving pattern of shadow and light all over its face. Slow swirls and swirls of black and silver, dizzy gallops, quiet pools of light abruptly shattered, all silently followed the swishing of leaves against the moon. It was like a vine of moonlight, which suddenly grew all over the house, smothering everything with its multitudinous swift leaves and tendrils of pale silver, and then as suddenly faded out. He stared up at this while his father fitted the key into the lock, feeling the ghostly vine grow strangely over his face and hands. Was it in this, at last, that he would find the explanation of all that bewildered him? Caroline, no doubt, would understand it; she was a sort of moonlight herself. He went slowly up the stairs. But as he took the medal and a small pink shell out of his pocket, and put them on his desk, he realized at last that Caroline was dead.

## THE DISCIPLE

### I.

FOUR o'clock struck in the church tower he was passing—the wide bronze rings of sound fell over him mingled with a fine powdery snow. He looked at his watch—how absurd!—and found that the church was quite right. This seemed the last straw in his boredom, and, as if instigated by it, he turned out of the quiet square, beginning to be patched with white under dim lamps, with here and there a black wheel-track showing, and moved listlessly towards the shopping district. "Why didn't I go?" he thought—without more than waving the vaguest of hands towards the imaginary destination or destiny. Then—"Middle age is a slow crucifixion." And then again, knocking snow from his coat, "I can't stand this damned solitude much longer." However, here were the shop-windows, a long gaudily jeweled row of them, pouring their colored lights across the snowy pavement and illuminating brilliantly the hordes of feverishly gesticulating pedestrians, the prowling taxis, the furtively creeping beetle-like limousines, the wet sides of horses. He went slowly, like a heavy moth, from window to window. He pulled his mustache, he stared, stamped his feet, devoured with dry eyes all that he saw—opal

necklaces, gold cigarette-cases, umbrellas with carved ivory handles, embroideries of Chinese scarlet, opera-glasses, microscopes, good God! what a strange collection. He felt as if he were somehow incrusting his soul with these things—he seemed to himself to be like one of those singular boxes, known to his childhood, covered all over hard, rough and coruscating, with small sea-shells. Yes, exactly, and the box itself empty. Sea-shells—sea-shells. He thought of sea-shells with great pleasure, and then of the sea, the twilight valley floors of the sea, the strange soft trees that grow there, and himself as somehow a denizen—what precisely? A tortoise incrusting with barnacles, indistinguishable from his bed of shells, immemorially old and white. Yes, something like that. . . .

“I should like,” he said to the florid Jewish shop-keeper, “to look at some oddity in the way of a set of chessmen.”

“A wedding gift, under peculiar circumstances. Something rather—” he waved a claw.

“—Rare?”

“—Old.”

A Chinese set with dragons, a Hindu set with elephants, a Japanese set of carved cherry-wood, daimyos, priests. . . . No, these weren't quite the thing. The Jew looked at him intently under wrinkled lids like a parrot's. Was his tongue, also, as hard and dry and old as a parrot's? . . . The Jew hunched his shoulders almost up to his ears.

"Ah—I think I know what you want. But it can't be had."

"You mean—"

"You were thinking, no doubt, of the set of the 'Twelve Disciples'?"

Astonishing! He had never heard of the set of the "Twelve Disciples"; and yet there could be no question that it was what he was seeking.

"Exactly!"

"Ah! But it is lost. . . . And even if it were found, who could afford to buy it?"

"Oh! Afford! . . ."

"Ah—you are right—what does it matter?"

"And what is it like, this set of the Twelve Disciples?"

"Like? It is—but don't you know?"

The Jew, leaning on the glass case, peered at him, he thought, somewhat peculiarly.

"How should I? I've never even heard of it."

"But you said—!"

"Ah—forgive me—it is true that when you mentioned it—how shall I say—it seemed to me in some remote way—familiar. That was all."

"Ah. I see—I see! . . . You thought you remembered it. . . . And if you think, if you concentrate upon it—if you turn, in your mind, a sudden light upon it—"

"I beg your pardon—?"

"—You don't see it any more clearly?"

"Why, no—how should I?"



"Oh. . . . But the set really is quite ordinary—as carving. Nothing remarkable."

"Then why is it so valuable?"

"Perhaps because it is generally considered mythical."

"Mythical? . . . It doesn't, after all, exist? . . .

"So some would say. As for me—"

"You believe in it?"

"I believe in it. . . . I have even, in dreams, seen it."

He found himself staring at the Jew, on this, as if at the revelation of some sort of obscure miracle. Yes, it appeared, the set of chessmen, in dreams; it came, in dreams, to this Jew. For a moment it seemed, in the oddest of ways, more tangible, it gave out a gleam and came nearer. Thirty-two pieces of ivory, close-clustered, one of them fallen over, and a candle lighting them. Had he dreamed this himself? It was vivid, and vivid was the hand he put out among them to right the fallen piece. But the fallen piece was stubborn, resisted, became massive. . . . He lifted his hand from the glass show-case, and stepped back. He had a sense of having resisted, barely resisted, and with an effort that left him trembling, a temptation not the less vast for having been incomprehensible. It was with a feeling of yielding to some obscure small issue of this temptation that he now said, with a conscious jocoseness that did not conceal excitement:

"And the piece that has fallen over—which piece is that?"



## II.

The effect of this remark was extraordinary. The tempo of the adventure—for adventure it unquestionably and profoundly was—instantly quickened. It was as if the stream on which they were being swept had not only broadened and taken on a dizzying speed, but had, as suddenly dived underground through a phantasmagoric darkness. Specifically, he found himself looking at a Jew who had somehow changed—he was less the shopkeeper, less, even, the human being, and more—something else. What, exactly? More imposing? That, certainly: and also, singularly, more luminous—he gave out a light, and his eyes, looking down, seemed in the kindest of manners to indicate that this light must also be a guidance. What it was that the Jew said he didn't catch. It was merely a short, vague exclamation, followed by a smile and a stare which were a little frightening in their suggestion of extraordinary intimacy. After that, it was as if every step taken was taken the more elaborately to insure for the ensuing talk the right seclusion and secrecy. The iron shutters outside the window were rattled harshly down and locked, the door was locked, the lights in the show-window were switched off, leaving the heap of jewels, oddities, silks and carvings in darkness. From outside in the night mingled with the subdued murmur of the street, came, even more subdued and tenuous, sounds of a bell, slowly struck, and as if blown down from a very great height. . . . When,

having followed his host through a passage and up the stairs, an uplifted tall candle flinging cascades of banister shadows over the richly ornamented wall, he entered the room over the shop, it was with a vague sense of having come an incredible distance in space and time—the street seemed far away, remote seemed the snowy square where, surely only a quarter of an hour ago, the clock had struck four; remotest of all seemed his own poor lodgings where the fire probably needed replenishing. Had he not, even, come a long way from himself—was his name still Dace? . . .

“The piece that has fallen over!” said the Jew, and gave a short laugh. He had set the candle on the chimneypiece, where its light, duplicated in the dusty mirror, was sufficient to show a faded room crowded with odds and ends. “That’s shrewd—that’s shrewd. That goes, certainly, to the root of things. . . . So you knew, all the time!”

“Knew? . . .”

“You were merely drawing me out, leading me on! Well, well! That was clever.”

Dace met the Jew’s richly insinuating stare with bland and genial acquiescence.

“What makes you think I know?”

“My dear chap! . . . Are you joking? . . . Why, of course it was your allusion to Judas.”

“Oh, I see—my allusion to Judas. . . .”

“—The piece that has fallen over, as you so nicely put it!”

“Oh—that! . . . So that is Judas? . . . But I

didn't, to tell the truth, know it at all. I knew nothing whatever!"

The Jew smiled at this with an excess of politeness, but the smile slowly faded.

"But—how extraordinary! . . . You really knew nothing?"

"As I say—nothing whatever."

"But how on earth, then, did you come to speak of the piece that has fallen over?"

They exchanged a long look over this question, as if (absurd! Dace found time to say to himself) it was, somehow, of tremendous import. But decidedly, it *was* of tremendous import. Whether the man were mad or not—and for the first moment Dace clearly formulated to himself that possibility—or whether he himself was on the verge of madness, did not seem particularly to matter. What was remarkable, or uncanny, was the way in which their sanity, or madness, brought them, in every consciousness, together. That singular vision of the chessmen—how explain it? His mental eye reverted to it, and he saw it now more sharply than ever. He saw the criss-crossing of shadows among the pieces, he saw deeply carved on the crown of the king nearest him the letters "I.N.R."—(and no doubt "I" was turned away from him); and there was Judas lying at the left-hand corner of the board, apparently on the point of rolling off. He put out his finger to it, tried to lift it—it was immovable, as if glued. But it *must* be moved! He felt the gathering within himself of a great wave of energy,

all directed to a huge decuman crash against the importunate obstacle. . . . Then he removed his hand from the edge of the small taboret (which he had hardly noticed) and leaned back in his chair, once more with a sense of temptation undergone and partially resisted. But again, it was a yielding to some small faint beckoning, some fugitive far signal, that put the next words on his tongue.

"Well," he said, and he laughed a little uneasily, "I'm sure I can't explain it. But no sooner had you spoken of seeing the chessmen in dreams than I had, on the spot, a kind of waking dream myself. I've just had it again. I didn't see *all* the pieces plainly—but plain enough was the piece which you say is Judas, and plain enough was the inscription on the crown of one of the kings."

"You mean the letters—?"

"I. N. R. I."

"Ah, yes. Exactly. . . . Rex Judæorum. . . . How extraordinary!"

"To put it very mildly!"

"What? . . . Oh, I don't mean that."

"I beg your pardon, then—but what *do* you mean?"

The Jew regarded him searchingly; Dace felt himself being slowly fathomed and gave himself agreeably to the experience, with a sense that he must keep still, let the plummet go straight.

"I mean"—the Jew was deliberate—"that while you see so much, without assistance—oh, certainly, quite without assistance—you nevertheless don't see *all*."

"All?"

"Yes—that's what I find extraordinary. . . . When, downstairs in the shop, you suddenly asked me 'And the piece that has fallen over—what piece is that?'—how could I but assume that your identification was complete? . . . I—as you saw—accepted you. And now, you say, you didn't at all recognize the piece as Judas! Certainly, that is very peculiar. I must suppose, however, as all the circumstances urge, that you would, had you been given time, have named Judas yourself. Yes, undoubtedly that is the explanation."

The look which the Jew turned on Dace shone with the most perfect innocence and trust, and he replied to it with a grave nod. The logic was reasonable—was it not? Yet something in what the Jew said perplexed and escaped him: he went over it slowly, aware that somewhere, in this small plausible structure of words, was one word which was not so much a "block" as a "window"—it let through a light which was disquietingly suggestive of a space beyond space, of a depth which yawned beneath the solid, a world that was, as he was at last to phrase it, "other." He found this word quickly enough—it was "identification"—and looked hard through it. What on earth had he meant by it? . . . It was simply a depth, a gleam, and nothing more. Yet, for some reason, he decided not to challenge it—not, at any rate, immediately. Wouldn't it be more fruitful simply to wait before it exactly as one would wait before a lighted window, to find out at last what it was precisely that

moved on the other side? Was it not also essential that he should in everything take his cue from the Jew?

It was therefore with a sense of the imperative necessity of delaying, of somehow gaining time, that he rose from his chair as if merely to look about him. The room to which he had been brought was extraordinary—a museum in microcosm. The candle, placed on the white marble mantel precariously between a tall much-figured clock and a Han horse, lighted the chamber only sufficiently to show its richness and its confusion. The only cleared space was that immediately before the fire, where the two chairs faced each other obliquely on the worn Persian carpet: for the rest, narrow lanes led hither and thither among a chaos of furniture and oddments which, in the gloom, had amazingly the air of a jungle. Chairs stood on tables, ivories and pictures balanced on chairs, shields, swords, and suits of chain mail hung on the walls with tapestries and Chinese paintings. Half a dozen clocks were ticking confusedly, only one of them visible. And dust was everywhere, thick, gritty dust, deposit of decades—on the mantel, the clock, the floor, the tables, here and there finger-marked. Even the mirror was dusty. And Dace, feeling the eyes of the Jew upon his back, and looking into the glass above the candle-flame, to examine the shopkeeper at his leisure, was able to see of him, in the veiled gloom, only the dimmest of outlines. He turned and faced his interlocutor.



"You have some fine things here," he murmured. "That horse, for example."

The Jew was inert. It was as if he knew Dace to be evading him. He stared a moment, then dropped his eyes.

"Ah—that little Han horse."

He was not interested in the horse, that was clear: and did not intend talking of it. But as Dace again sank into his chair, sighing, the Jew leaned sharply toward him, and smiled. Dace was touched by something in this smile—it was singularly gentle and friendly, a little humble. Why was it, nevertheless, that it seemed so oddly belied by the eyes? For in the eyes, lidded like a parrot's, something disquieting flickered.

"You do not yet altogether trust me—do you!" said the Jew, still smiling.

Dace laughed outright, but not entirely with conviction. He was still trying, as it were, to gain time.

"Trust you? But why on earth shouldn't I? Is it any question—"

"Oh, not of business, no! Certainly not. . . . We are not concerned with business. . . . Isn't it really," he lowered his tone a little, "something very much more important?"

"Important?"

"Yes. Isn't it at bottom simply the question of our trusting—*completely* trusting—one another?"

Dace looked hard into the little eyes, which, in intensity of meaning, seemed to blaze.



"Oh, that!" he exclaimed gently. He directed his unseeing stare at the fire in an effort to conceal his confusion. Where, where on earth, he cried to himself, am I going? He felt slightly dizzy, but managed to affect a calm. Whether the shopkeeper was a madman or a prophet seemed for the present a wholly irrelevant question.

"That's of course taken for granted—isn't it?" he went on. And then added, for all the world as if the words were not so much his own as somehow *given* him? "What I mean is—isn't it sufficient guarantee of our mutual trust—or sympathy, at all events—that so far, for all the singularity of our intercourse, we so easily and with so little error, *follow* one another?" He was pleased with himself at this, and showed it by smiling a little more lightly than before, and also by relaxing slightly in his chair.

And the shopkeeper, too, was pleased. He again, in that curious way which Dace had noticed downstairs in the shop, seemed before his very eyes in the act of changing: it was as if he became more significant, as if all his colors became brighter and richer, as if a secret low light within had somehow been sharply turned up. The wrinkled lids lifted a little, and the face became luminous with words of which Dace felt that he could almost, in advance, see the shape.

"Ah," came the pleased murmur. "Exactly. That's a good deal better, isn't it? We begin to know where we are. And isn't it important that you should agree

with me, since you use the word 'follow,' that *I follow you* quite as successfully as *you follow me*? I don't mean to urge or press you—no—no. But that, I think, if you will permit my saying so, is—er—a point—"

"Of cardinal importance? Yes—I believe it is. You mean—"

"I mean that, in all the experience we are sharing, or are about to share, you are contributing—quite without any assistance from me—as much as I. Or, to put it in another way, that you have been as free to accept as complete *my* identification as I have been to accept or reject yours. The responsibility is divided."

"Responsibility?"

The Jew's face clouded.

"Perhaps that's not the best word," he explained a little painfully. "There's of course no serious question of responsibility. Responsibility for what?" He laughed. "No. We can put that aside. . . . Though it might be as well, afterwards, to know that it had been said."

It was clear to Dace the Jew meant, by responsibility, responsibility for their mutual delusion. And surely there could be no harm in appearing to admit a share in the creation of it?

"Well—I'm quite ready to grant it, if you are—why not?"

Dace's friendly, and perhaps slightly paternal, grin, was met by one as friendly. They remained so for a moment, smiling, smiling as over the exchange of some-

thing secret and precious. Then, firmly, Dace continued—

“But we’ve got rather far away, haven’t we, from the set of the Twelve Disciples. What about that?”

“Ah, my dear fellow! Are you so determined to make a joke of it?”

“A joke? Why no.”

“But surely you realize that it’s just that that we’ve *been*, all this time, talking about!”

“Oh! Oh! I see.”

“But my dear chap—*do* you see? . . .”

The shopkeeper’s voice, on this, had become rather surprisingly loud and agitated. “*Do* you see! . . . Or *have* I been, after all, so hideously mistaken?”

“But how could you have been?”

“Ah, yes—how could I have been. It’s ridiculous, . . . Tell me”—he went on slowly, as if he was feeling his way with the greatest of care. “When you think of this set, when you light it sharply for yourself—do you feel towards it, in any way, any sort of—impulse?”

Dace was startled. Impulse? Of course he did. But was it wise, after all, to admit it? What was this singular shopkeeper up to? . . . The rapidity of events had confused him. But it was necessary, after all—it was even imperative—that in this other-world darkness some sort of outline should be made out, some purpose or design should be guessed. Certainly, it did not seem an extravagance to suppose that the Jew was mad; nor was it in any way an extravagance to per-

ceive, as he was almost sure he perceived, a slow, methodical, careful effort on the Jew's part, to weave strongly the illusion, and to weave into it, as a vital part of it, both himself, and, what was more important, Dace. More obscure was the question whether the Jew was conscious of doing this. When he had so emphatically caviled over the point of their divided, their coöperative responsibility for the delusion—if it *was* a delusion—it had certainly appeared that he was, even if mad, aware of what he was doing. He had seemed quite consciously fearful lest Dace should suspect something. This odd something which he had so zealously guarded—was it, at bottom, nothing but a dim kind of hypnosis? But, if so, what was it for? . . . Dace looked hard into this tangle. It had no beginning and no end, and there was no point at which he might, with any clearness of view, start to unravel it. Most disquieting of all was his inability to distinguish, in his own mind, that part of this growing, glimmering, mutual delusion which might, quite genuinely, and quite, as the Jew had said, “without any assistance,” be his own strange contribution. But was *any* of it his own? . . . To admit that was to admit either one of two possibilities, neither of them comforting. It was to admit either that he himself was on the border of a kind of madness, or else that he had suddenly, with a catastrophic crash, gone through some queer crust of the world into a dimension which he had not hitherto known to exist, but which was none the less grotesquely real. But surely this was absurd! The man must be mad. Mad,

but with a madness of which some intrinsic and secret element was an extraordinary power to exert an influence. Could it be also that he, Dace, by some psychological freak, was in exactly the right state of mind to be easily influenced? *Was* he responsible? . . . His misgiving, however, was only momentary, and, hearing again, in that still, strange room, the ethereal far ringing of the half-hour bells of the church tower, in the world he had left outside, and in a sense so far behind, his feeling of adventure was once more deepened and renewed. Strange, strange, he said to himself, and found himself, for no reason, staring at his hands, which he had lifted. Old hands: old and scarred. He stared at them, hard, as if he desired to look into them, to discover there some curious and embedded revelation. It embarrassed him, presently, to find that the Jew was watching this action intently, and had lifted his own hands into the same position. His answer was thus, in a manner, startled out of him. Was the Jew, then, in the very act of hypnotizing him? . . .

"Impulse?" he said. . "I thought I had told you. Yes—I have an impulse, a curious and very strong one. I think it must have been because of that impulse that I've just found myself, as you seem to have observed—" he laughed—"staring so idiotically at my old hands. . . . Each time that I have clearly visualized this set of chessmen, with its kings, and its fallen Judas, I have half-surrendered to the most unaccountable impulse to *right* the fallen piece. And each time, on coming to my senses, I've found myself pressing,

very hard, against—well, the showcase downstairs, the taboret, here. That, I suppose, is what you mean?”

The Jew nodded.

“Exactly. And now— But first let me repeat that you are—how shall I put it—mentally quite free in this matter—isn’t that true?”

“But, of course—how could it not be?” Dace, saying this, felt a little disingenuous.

“Well. The interesting question then is—do you see any *reason* for this impulse? . . . Don’t let me hurry you—take your time. Try, if you like, lighting the board for yourself once more. Observe, if you can, when you feel this impulse, whether it is connected with any profound feeling of *identification*—or shall we say, rather, sympathy. . . . Perhaps I embarrass you. I’ll turn my back.”

The Jew walked to the mantel, and resting one foot on the brass fender, appeared to stare into the disintegrating coal fire. Identification! That word again. It was important—it meant that something, something very peculiar, was expected of him. Left thus to himself, Dace felt that at last a definite turning-point had come, and felt also quite clearly, that it was in his power to “go on” or not, just as he chose; not merely a power to refuse or acquiesce, but something much more singular—a power, if he liked, to acquiesce *creatively*. If the man was mad—and certainly the worn and shiny back, the high peaked shoulders and comically bald head combined to produce an effect of decided queerness—his madness might be harmless, and



was also, for Dace—and this struck him as remarkable—perfectly, potentially *transparent*. What Dace felt was indeed that if now he were to make the smallest effort (of a sort which he recognized brilliantly, but could scarcely analyze) he would not only be able to see the mechanism of the Jew as clearly as one sees the mechanism of a glass-cased clock, but also exactly what that mechanism, so driven and so eccentric, would demand of *himself*. Even this was not all. For was it not also true that, once he accepted this course, something of himself would have to be surrendered? . . . Would it not definitely involve his “descent” or “ascent,” into that curious void, already glimpsed, of the “other” world? . . . Was he not quite clearly putting himself in the hands of this Jew? . . . Certainly the mere summoning up once more, before his mind’s eye, of the chess-board, the peculiar set of chessmen, was absurdly easy—he could do it without any effort whatever. It was, in fact, already there—he had only to look at it. If there was something just the least disquieting in this fact—in the fact that he might almost say that his mind was, in a manner, *possessed*—he at once waved the suggestion away. He looked, then, once again at the visionary board. It was closer, more pressingly vivid and alive, than ever. He could certainly, if he liked, put his hand out and touch it—he could certainly put his hand among the pieces, past the White King (whose crown showed the letters I. N. R.) and lift the fallen Knight, which was Judas. This was what he desired to do—



he put out his hand, and as he did so, realized for the first time how extraordinarily important this action was for him. The fallen piece, however, resisted him as before, resisted his thought, would not be otherwise conceived than as fallen. But it *must* be lifted! He strained at the shadow, concentrating against it a whole world of shadows. He bent his life against it. It could not be seized, it would not budge. It was as if he were—yes—trying to lift a part of himself—a symbol—

The revelation was sudden enough to shock him. He broke into a cold sweat, and barely mastered an impulse to spring to his feet. There was still time to “go back”—he seemed to see it, however, as a long way, and involving, also, a sort of cowardice. It was to go back into—hadn’t he, in the snow-filled square, called it the slow crucifixion of middle age—boredom? This could hardly be worse; though he now knew, with a sense rather spacious and vast than precise, that it involved danger. Still, it was possible to go forward, with caution. He would keep *some* part of his wits about him—still free, and his own. He was a match, he felt, for—well, for that Jew. He needn’t be influenced, beyond a certain point? . . .

He opened his eyes, which during his waking dream he had shut, and rose. The Jew turned about. For a moment the two men regarded each other in silence, a silence broken only by the small feverish ticking of invisible clocks. The shopkeeper, when at last he spoke, spoke in a tone which had become, for no apparent

reason, sardonic and slightly tyrannous. He leaned back, with his elbows behind him on the white marble mantel.

"Well?" he said.

Dace was cool—he allowed himself a slightly ironic smile.

"You were quite right," he rang out. Then, measuring with the nicest accuracy the queer light in the other's eyes he went on, with a considered leisureliness, which he perhaps intended to be provocative—"I do identify myself with one of the pieces on the board—as you so perspicaciously suggested. . . . I identify myself with Judas."

"I didn't suggest it"—cried the Jew. "I didn't suggest it! As God is my witness. . . . Don't think it!"

Dace was amazed by the violence of this outburst. He was amazed also by the change in the Jew's appearance. He stood rigid and tall, his fists clenched at his sides, his face white as the marble, his large mouth grotesquely opened in a fixed and tragic expression of suffering, like the mouth of the tragic mask. He was absurd—Dace had even a fleeting desire to "kick" him—but he was also portentous.

"I think you misunderstand me," Dace pursued, endeavoring to speak without agitation. "You merely suggested that I might, during this waking dream, experience some feeling of sympathy—am I not right? Well, I now tell you that is true. God knows how you guessed it!" He laughed apologetically. "And I improve on your suggestion, quite clearly, when I tell

you that in this dream *Judas and I are one and the same person*. . . . Isn't it extraordinary!"

The Jew, at this, merely gasped. Then relaxing, and as if he had suddenly become faint, he sank into a chair, where he dropped his face into his hands and began absurdly rolling his great, dark curly head from side to side, as if in an ecstasy of pain. "Ah, my God," he breathed through his hands, without looking up. "Ah, my God, my God!"

Dace, if he was surprised by the spectacle, did not show it. He merely watched, with the absorbed amusement of a child, this uncontrolled and unexplained behavior, and smiled. The top of the Jew's head, with its bald spot ringed with curls, thus rolling heavily and serpentine, with that 'sinuous' unction peculiar to camels and Jews, simply struck him as funny.

### III.

He was also, however, somewhat disgusted. And it was with some severity that he asked, after a moment:

"Are you feeling ill?"

The shopkeeper stopped rolling his head. His face remained hidden in his hands, nevertheless, and it was some time before he sat up, looking extraordinarily ravaged and pale, and with his large mouth still tragically relaxed. His voice, when at last he spoke, had changed, had become harsh, deep, tortured, uncertain—"Biblical"—Dace had time to say to himself.

"You persist in being flippant," the voice cried. "You have no seriousness. You permit yourself merely

to be amused by all this. And you have the impertinence to ask me if I am ill when, as you might see, I am simply overcome by compassion. My God! Don't you see that it is serious, that it is tragic—that we sound together the whole horror of the world?"

He glared at Dace with unexpected ferocity. Then, before Dace had time for anything but a turmoil of bewilderment, he sprang up, approached Dace's chair menacingly, leaned over him, pointed at him with a white thick finger on which he wore three rings.

"You are Judas, and you admit it. Don't pretend any longer that you don't fully realize it. The time for such foolery is past. You are Judas. You knew it before you came in here—you came in to tell me. You knew the countersign—you asked for the set of Twelve Disciples. Ah! I know everything. You tried to fool me, but you couldn't—I saw through your pretences from the beginning—I knew you were coming today. And why shouldn't I? It's Easter Eve. You know as well as I do that we always meet on Easter Eve! . . ."

Dace sat as if hypnotized: his glassy eyes fixed on the thick withered eyelids of the Jew. He was frightened, and found it difficult to control his voice.

"Why, what do you mean?" he stammered.

"What do I mean! You ask me what do I mean! Ah, my God! Do I have to drag it all out of you like this? You have no honesty, no seriousness, no repentance? You are Judas. You were born in the Island of Kerioth. You murdered your father and

married your mother. Pilate! Pilate! Do you hear? You kept books for Pilate. You cheated him. And then you went looking for Jesus, because you thought He could forgive you for incest. Ha! And you cheated Him too: you stole from Him. You kept back the moneys. Your passion came on you—you wanted gold and silver. You stole from the shepherds in the market-place—you stole from the other Disciples. Finally, because your fingers itched, you sold Jesus. What's the good of denying it? I can see that you remember it—you knew it all the time. It's Easter Eve, and you've come back again. I knew you were coming—I know everything."

The Jew stepped back with a gesture of triumph, dropping his hand. He squared his high peaked shoulders as if in a paroxysm of righteousness. His coarse face was radiant—transfigured.

"Well," said Dace, in a small voice, but clearly, "suppose I *am* Judas—suppose I *do* admit it. Suppose I admit even that I knew it before I came here, and came here with the sole purpose of revealing myself to you. You know everything—so I suppose I'll have to grant you that I even knew that the set of the Twelve Disciples was the password—which, I take it, we're in the habit of exchanging, in this extraordinary fashion, every Easter Eve. Is this Easter Eve? I didn't know it. I suppose I'm allowed a respite from Hell on Easter Eve—is that it? . . . But, supposing that all this is true—what about it?"

"Ah," the Jew cried, "you're incorrigible. . . . Why

do you always make it so—difficult for me! If only once, once, you would admit it all—tell me everything from your heart—help me to sound the horror of the world, instead of leaving me to sound it alone! Only once!” He sank into his chair, flung his head back, and regarded Dace pityingly as from an immense moral distance.

“Listen!” said Dace. “I want you to believe me when I tell you that I’m not trying to deceive you or make it hard for you. I’m honestly trying to tell you everything I know. If there are some things I don’t know which you think I ought to know—well, it’s because there’s some barrier which I don’t understand, some barrier. Do you see? . . . For example, I suppose I ought to know—since I’ve met you so often—who you are. But I don’t! . . . Who are you?”

“I am Ahasver—the eternal Jew.”

“Oh! You are—I see. And we meet every Easter Eve.”

“Every Easter Eve.”

“You are eternal—of course, I’ve heard of you. As for me, I suppose I’m just, for the moment, reincarnated.”

“Reincarnated.”

“That, I suppose, is why you can remember me, but I can’t remember you.”

“You *must* remember!”

“I don’t. I remember nothing.”

“Try! Think of last year.”

“I don’t remember last year.”



"Salt Lake City! It was in Salt Lake City. Do you remember?"

"No, I've never been to Salt Lake City."

"You have—you were there last year. My shop was in Myrtle Street. We met outside it, just as six o'clock struck. You were smoking a pipe. When I asked you who you were, you said your name was O'Grady."

"Oh! Did I?"

"Yes. You said at first that you wanted to pawn something—your watch. You looked very different. You had a beard. Then, we were inside the shop, and the door was shut—"

"Ah! I asked for a peculiar set of chessmen!"

"You remember! You remember! . . . And the year before it was at Buenos Ayres. . . . My shop was on the second floor, over a colonnade. I had a sign hanging outside—with my name on it, Juan Espera en Dios. . . . You were a little Portuguese Jew named Gomez—your skin was very yellow, you were suffering from the jaundice. Do you remember?"

"No—I've never been to Buenos Ayres. Never."

"Ah, you shameless liar! . . . Liar! . . . You lie merely to make me suffer. Don't! Don't! And the year before that—"

"My dear fellow, do you remember them all?"

"Every one. It was on the Ponte Vecchio—my name was over the door, Butta Deus. A very small shop, with bracelets and filigree necklaces. Ah, you were very droll that time—and very shabby, poor. A poor



tailor, you said your name was Fantini. You had no thumb on your left hand, and said it didn't interfere with your work—you showed me how flexible and cunning were your fingers. And ah, my God, how stubborn you were, how you denied it! But you always deny it, you always torture me. . . . It is my punishment."

The Jew covered his eyes with one hand and sank into an absorbed silence. He looked as if he were praying. Dace examined him in astonishment—observed the tufts of grizzled hair in his ears, the gray sparse whorls of beard under the edges of the jaw, the greasy old-fashioned black stock under the lowered chin. Three heavy gold rings were on the fourth finger, one of them set with a coarse peach-agate. . . . Behind him in the tumbled room somewhere a clock struck seven in a small sweet voice, then another, nearer at hand, more briskly and loudly, then two others, simultaneously, their voices, one brazen and one treble, infelicitously mingling. Seven o'clock? But to Dace the world seemed timeless; and he felt extraordinarily, with a bright translucence, that made him bodiless, that he was existing separately, at one and the same time, in Salt Lake City, Buenos Ayres, Florence—and where else? He seemed to know himself perfectly as O'Grady—he was tall and bearded, smoked a pipe, walked, in the warm, clear dusk, into Myrtle Street, where, sure enough, the Jew awaited him. But what was the Jew's name there? He had forgotten to say. . . . Certainly, as Gomez he had had the jaundice,

as Fantini had lost his left thumb. Absurd! And this ghastly multiple career extended back, troubled, passionate, full of sinister echoes, for eighteen hundred and thirty-five years. And the unchanging secret in him, through all this harlequinade, was Judas! These hands were the hands of Judas—the hands of the paricide, the thief, the betrayer. . . . And what, in all this amazing nightmare, so profoundly actual, did the Jew want of him? Sympathy? An exchange of understanding? . . . He tried to remember what it was that the Jew had done, what offense it was that his eternal wanderings were a punishment for. Perhaps if he closed his eyes it would come back to him. For a moment he would submit a little, allow this extraordinary influence— Ah! It began to come back to him. It was something outrageous, something revolting—there was a crowd—Jesus was passing, carrying something—and the shopkeeper—Ahasver—what was it he did? He leaned forward out of the crowd and spat at Jesus and said something—that was it. Something hateful.

“What was it you said?” Dace asked.

“On the Ponte Vecchio?”

“No—on Golgotha.”

“Ah, I won’t repeat it—every time you ask me to repeat it! And you know as well as I do!”

“I know you said something—I don’t know what you said.”

The Jew leaped to his feet, his face flushed with fury.

He made a gesture of curved hands towards Dace's throat, as if he would like to strangle him.

"Hypocrite! You sit there and pretend you know nothing—you, my only friend! Well, I'll tell you what I did—I spat in His face, that's what I did! Yes! I leaned out and spat right in His face, and said in a loud ugly voice: 'Go on quicker!' And He stopped and looked at me—ah, you can see Him stopping—and answered—I go; but thou shalt wait till My return! . . . That's what happened, Judas! . . . And you, where were you? On Olivet, with an old bit of rope, the halter of an ass? But it did you no good. No. You were merely doing what you'd have to do over and over again. For you, too, were included in the words 'There be some of those that stand here which shall in no wise taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom!'"

"We are friends, then," murmured Dace. "We are friends!"

"We are the oldest friends in the world. And yet you torture me."

"I don't mean to torture you. I am trying to understand."

"I forgive you, my friend—I forgive you." And suddenly the Jew leaned down and touched, with his white soft hand the right hand of Dace, where it rested on the arm of the chair: a touch fawning and horrible. There were tears in his eyes. He patted Dace's hand twice, with a grotesque and repulsive tenderness, and smiled; then, straightening:

"No one else forgives us—why shouldn't we forgive each other? God has forgotten us—He only remembers to forget us. Ah, my old friend, let us not forget each other! Let us remember each other all we can, and forgive each other with all our hearts. You see why it is that I want so horribly, so horribly, to have you remember me! To be an outcast, eternal, hated by God and man, unforgiven, loved by none—to be used by God for His own inscrutable purpose, yet punished for it forever! Perhaps God means that we shall be a comfort to each other. Perhaps He means in that way to reward us—to grant us, as recompense, the greatest, deepest, oldest friendship ever known by men."

"Yes," said Dace faintly, "why not? Why not? Perhaps He does."

"I am sure of it, my friend—Judas, I am sure of it! We have a bond, the greatest of bonds. Each of us committed a sin in its way unparalleled. No others have sounded the depths that we have sounded. At the very bottom of the world, most miserable Gehenna of Gehennas, we meet and embrace. Surely that is something! Yes, I believe it is a proof of the essential goodness and wisdom and mercifulness of God. I wrong Him by saying that He has forgotten us! He has not forgotten us. Isn't it perhaps truer to say that we are a part of God, the part of Him that is evil and that suffers? What a vision! What pride we can legitimately take in being ourselves! In us is concentrated the most intense suffering, the deepest dark-

ness, the most unmitigated horror, of the world. . . . Let us share it, old friend—on this one day in the year when we meet, for these few uncertain hours in an infinity of torment, let us share our grief and pride, and open our hearts.”

Dace was extraordinarily moved by this speech; but he could scarcely have said whether he was more impressed, or horrified, or amused. So this was where they were—at the bottom of the world, at the bottom of the bottomless pit. What a vision, indeed! And himself and this repulsive shopkeeper, sinister dual embodiment of the world's evil, embracing passionately in the blown smoke of Gehenna. Treachery kissing obscenity! Laughter would have been a relief to him, but he felt, with a peculiar anxiety, that the moment was not propitious. Wasn't there still, somewhere in all this, a danger? Something there was which the Jew had said which had alarmed him; but he could not now recall it. Decidedly he must keep his wits with him.

“Yes,” he answered slowly, with averted eyes, “we are old friends, our sympathies ought to be of the profoundest. We are, as you say, in the same boat—if it isn't flippant to put it in so homely a fashion. We know each other, don't we?”

“Ah,” said the Jew, “but do you know me as I know you? That is the question that curses me, that always curses me! You are so hesitant, so uncertain! You distress me so with your questions, and the blanks

in your memory! If only we were *exactly* alike, and you remembered, each year, all that I remember!"

"It's a pity—it's a pity."

"A tragedy, rather! . . . For me a tragedy. . . . Yet I mustn't be selfish. That is the part assigned to me—to remember, to be the memory. I must remember your sorrows as well as my own. It is my privilege to remind you. Corfu, for example! Do you remember Corfu?"

"Corfu? No."

"Tonight in Corfu they are stoning you. Listen!" The Jew lifted a peremptory finger, commanding silence. Dace listened intently, as if he really expected to hear something; but nothing disturbed the sequestered hush of the room save the ticking of clocks, their own breathing, and the sinking of coals in the grate. Why on earth Corfu? An island in the Adriatic, was it?

"I hear nothing," he said.

"In Corfu, on every Easter Eve, they stone you. Every window is opened, and old crockery, stones, and sticks, are flung violently into the streets. I can hear it. I can see the angry faces. I can hear the screams of hate and triumph. And ah, my God, I can feel the stones on my body, in my soul, wretched compassionate creature that I am. . . . Do you feel them? Do you hear them?"

"Nothing whatever—no."

The Jew seemed hurt, bewildered. He stared at the floor.



"No—you hear nothing, feel nothing. . . . I suppose God intended it so. . . . And yet it seems as if you ought to be prepared. A warning would be an act of mercy. To remember nothing, to experience the tragedy afresh each time! Horrible."

"A warning? What do you mean?"

The Jew fixed Dace's eyes intently. What strange light was it that tried there, through the smoke of confused emotions, to flash out? Compassion? Cunning? But the eyelids lowered, the Jew looked away. Then he said tonelessly:

"I mean for your hanging."

#### IV.

Dace, at this, felt that his heart had stopped beating altogether. His consciousness flew off like a vapor, he experienced, for a timeless instant, a perfect and horrible annihilation. Then his ears began ringing, his temples were hammered like cymbals, his arms violently trembled. The room came back to him, but smaller, more real and shabby in the candlelight; and the Jew before him, musing in his chair, seemed also unaccountably shabbier and smaller. He felt slightly sick.

"Oh," with hardly a tremor, "I'm to hang myself?"

"Ah, my dear friend!" wailed the Jew, "my dear friend!" He wrung his hands.

"But here—in this room?"

"It is better so—is it not? That's as it always is."



"Oh, it's always so, I see. . . . And O'Grady, what about O'Grady?"

"O'Grady? What do you mean?"

"He hanged himself, for you, in Salt Lake City?"

"Not for me—not for me! For God!"

"And Gomez—and the tailor, Fantini?"

"Yes—" the Jew whispered. "They too. All of them. Every year. . . . My poor friend! I was afraid, afraid that you didn't remember. I've done my best for you. I've tried to—"

"Break the news gently? Yes! So you have. I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

The two men stared at each other. It was then Dace who went on.

"There's the trivial, purely practical matter of the rope," he said. "I suppose you have the rope."

"Yes. I'll get it for you. It's the same one."

"The halter of the ass?"

"Yes."

The Jew rose, sighing, took the candle, and went to a high cupboard in the front corner of the room by the shuttered window. The lifted candle, when the door had been flung back, lighted a tall crucifix within, the figure of Christ carved of a pallid greenish stone. Below it, on the cupboard floor, stood an earthen bowl. It occurred to Dace that the bowl might bear the stains of sacrifice. The Jew lifted from a hook a small coil of rope, closed the cupboard, and returned to Dace.

"There!" he said. "Take it."

Dace rose, but he did not take the rope. Instead he

took up his hat from the taboret. At the Jew's look of astonished incredulity he laughed.

"No," he then said. "I shan't take it—I must be going. It's late."

"Going?" stammered the Jew. Then he cried out again, horribly, in his Biblical prophetic voice: "Going, without—"

"Certainly. Going without hanging myself. Do you seriously expect me to hang myself for you?"

He laughed again. Then, as the shopkeeper, angrily flushed, took a step forward, he took a step forward to meet him.

"Listen," he cried, "you're insane! insane! and you know it."

A look of desolation, of horror, relaxed the Jew's face—the jaw sagged, the large mouth opened. He sat down, still holding the rope.

"That's right—sit down. And don't you dare to move till I'm out of this house—do you hear? Sit still! Or I'll report you to the police."

He took the candle, and walked slowly to the door through the aisle of dusty furniture. At the door, a thought suddenly struck him. He set down the candle, took out a card, wrote on it, and put it on a table.

"Here's my name and address," he said. "Send me, in the morning, the set of the Twelve Disciples! . . . Good-by!"

The shopkeeper, whom he could only dimly make out in the now almost unlighted jungle of bric-à-brac,

made no answer. Dace turned, went down the stairs, put the candle on the floor, and let himself out.

## v.

When three days had passed, without his having had any signal from the Jew, Dace determined to go and see him. The adventure, he thought, must be an anti-climax: but there were one or two possibilities about which he was curious. Was it not conceivable, for example, that the wretched man, in some obscure sort of religious ecstasy, might have done himself a violence? . . . It was in bright sunlight that he passed this time through the square and turned into the shopping district: not yet noon. Missing, for a fraction of a minute, the shop, which was small, he had a renewal of his excitement—it seemed to him not too incredible that the shop, and its singular proprietor, might never have existed at all. But here it was.

What startled him was that the Jew did not recognize him: not in the slightest. He had uttered no greeting, on entering, had merely looked at the shop-keeper, expecting that the result would be an exclamation. But the Jew simply looked up from his glass case, which was opened at the back, and where he seemed to be arranging a small plush tray of jades and corals—looked up with a mild, polite interest. And as Dace, surprised, stared at him, it was the Jew who was the first to speak.

“Good morning!” he said. His tone was friendly

—not intimate, not obsequious. “Is there something I can show you?”

Dace looked very hard at those green eyes under their sleepy lids.

“I am looking, as a matter of fact, for something odd in the way of a set of chessmen.”

The shopkeeper was suavely interested.

“Chessmen? Certainly. . . . Had you anything particular in mind?”

Dace’s heart gave a leap. The Jew was putting away his jades, unconcerned.

“Well—what I should really like to get hold of is a set I’ve heard called the set of the Twelve Disciples. . . . Do you happen to know anything about it?”

The shopkeeper tapped his fingers idly on the glass.

“No, I can’t say I do. Twelve Disciples! No. . . . Very curious. . . . Do you know where it was made?”

Dace leaned forward against the case.

“I don’t; no. . . .” He stared at the shopkeeper, who was very close to him. “Tell me—haven’t we met before?”

The Jew returned his stare perplexedly.

“I don’t think so—have we? . . . I have a good memory for faces—bad for names. Still, I may be at fault!”

“I think you are—I think you are!” Dace said—and laughed. “You’re wearing glasses today—you weren’t before.”

“Oh?” The Jew’s smile was friendly, but vague.

“Yes. . . . Don’t you remember taking me to your

room upstairs? You showed me a crucifix in a cupboard."

"Did I?" The shopkeeper smiled, wagged his ugly head, shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, then I *am* at fault. I take so many people up there, you see, to look at things—you must forgive me!"

"Oh, I forgive you!"

They chuckled together, amicably. Then Dace bought a Chinese set of carved ivory and bade the Jew good morning.

## BY MY TROTH, NERISSA!

FIVE o'clock. He looked at his watch, hoping that it was later—late enough for dinner. That was characteristic. He was always hoping that it was later than it really was, hoping that an hour had gone, a day had gone. Other people were anxious about being too late—he was anxious about being too early. Supreme, everlasting, devastating boredom. His watch was a symbol of that, and now as he put it back in his pocket, cherishing its warm smoothness, he cursed the hour and a half that yawned like a chasm before his next "action." He walked wearily along the gravel path. Piles of leaves were burning, and the smoke came heavily over his face. Wet leaves: there had been a shower. He was irritatingly conscious of his stick, which kept entangling itself with his coat, and which was so light that it would not properly thrust against the gusty wind. Besides, it was too long, struck the ground too sharply, and was particularly annoying in a deserted street, where its rhythmic clack on the stones made him feel like screaming. In a moonlit street it became positively portentous, and it seemed to him that he was trying to balance a telegraph pole. It scraped now against an unforeseen rise in the path, and he drew it up under his arm, regaining a little of his composure. Then he stepped off the path onto the

grass, swung the stick triumphantly, and thrust it into the ground, at every step, with delight. He impaled an empty match-box. He impaled a yellow leaf. He aimed it as if it were a gun at a robin, who took no notice, but, with suddenly lowered head, performed a little mechanical run and then stood still, listening for a worm. "Fly away south, old man! No worms here, unless you listen to my head." His face did not change expression—he was conscious that it didn't—but in imagination he heard himself laughing loudly.

That was exactly the problem, the problem that kept him awake late at night, that woke him up early, and that nevertheless made him long for sleep as he longed for nothing else—profound, profound nothingness and annihilation of sleep, complete and harmonious escape. Yes, that was the problem: to find and name this worm that gnawed at his brain. What on earth was this new obsession for—this horror of shaving? He had had it now for three days and three nights, and his nights it had made hideous; for his thoughts kept reverting to the new razor, and whenever he saw it, in his mind's eye, lying there on the shelf in all its bright sheerness, he felt a spastic contraction of the chest. He had lain awake for two hours, the first morning, wondering whether he would dare to shave with it. In a sinister way it had seemed to be connected, as with steel wires, to his jangled nerves and gradually he had become convinced that as soon as he touched it some obscure impulse would turn the blade against his flesh. He had conquered his terror—had managed to shave, trembling



a little, and noting with astonishment the pallor of his face, and the narrow intensity of his pupils. . . . Well, obviously, it was too late in the day for any mere timidity about shaving to develop! It was something deeper than that. Whatever the worm was, it had bored into the very center, and his brain was honey-combed with galleries—hollow enough to float—its specific gravity markedly impaired.

He sat down on a wet bench, and as he did so the sun came out and made a pale sparkling brightness of the grass. This was refreshing: it gave a change of scene. He was not exactly sure where it put him. He was barefooted, that was clear, and he was exquisitely conscious of the cool, dispersed wetness of the grass under his sensitive feet, and of the sharpness of twigs. Coarse, thick, ropy spider's webs glistened on the dingy box-hedge, and at the bottom of every silken funnel he could see a vigorous spider with curved claws. The smell of wet leaves was like early morning. Then there was some question of nasturtiums, matted snakily together by a heavy rain in the night—acid: he liked the yellow ones best. . . . The warm smell of burning leaves came again over him, and the thought of the razor, with its sinister bracketing of edge and flesh. He began to compose a letter to Sara. Should he address her by her "pet" name—Sahara—the name originally suggested by the fact that she pronounced her name to rhyme with the desert? Too flippant at this crisis.

"My dear Sara: Why is it that you are made of

flesh—why, indeed, if God, as it is reported, created you in His image, did He not dispense for once with the common straw and clay and dip His hands into the clear brightness of the ether? I cannot, no, I have made up my mind on the point, reconcile myself to the fact that your mouth, which I once in a vision saw as a flower without function, exists really for the taking in of food and of men; that you have an alimentary canal, liable at the most inopportune moments to utter its obscene borborygmi—or as Jake coarsely puts it, its bubbling of the gut—amid harmonies seemingly more ethereal; that you have kidneys, and liver, and ductless glands, all plying at all times their little secret juicy trades. It is no good retorting, as I hear you angrily retort (between mouthfuls of the best beef), that all this holds just as well of me. Of course. To be sure. Certainly. That's precisely why I should like to find in some hallowed corner of this dingy universe a creature of a beauty and texture more translucent—compounded, let us say, of air and fire. You will say that this is an unreasonable demand. But if it is really unreasonable why does it occur to me—is it only a disease of the flesh that enables flesh to conceive the finer-than-flesh? . . . At all events, my dear Sahara Desert, what I passionately want you to understand at this crisis in our lives is that if I now take flight from you and recede rapidly into the blue obscure, weaving about myself a fine shroud of stellar air, it is not the individual but the generic you that I flee from, finding horrible. For this horror is ubiquitous

—its yellow tooth is everywhere, in all women, in all men. I have fought against it for years. Yes, I recall its fangs in even my very first love-affair, when years ago walking in a dark London square with a woman whose affection for me was a little too public and unrestrained (she suddenly tried to embrace me, murmuring, no, shouting, passionate phrases!) I observed a sign, happily emblazoned against the palings of a fence, 'Organs and street cries prohibited near here,' and read it aloud to her, with the fortunate result that she was dissolved into shrieks of laughter. . . . I do not know in the least why I should want to recite to you this oblique episode of my past. Perhaps only because it gives you a little of my background. But background is so important and so complicated! What use to give you a mere fragment like this? Isn't it equally important that I should tell you that I dislike intensely the odor of female perspiration; that I have an obscure passion for jungles, snake-infested thickets, and the sound of horns; that a dull pencil makes me miserable and inert, as if paralyzed, and that I find intolerable any business dealing with a stranger? . . . Even so, I make hardly the slightest of beginnings. I'm a sort of nexus of loathings. As I sit here in the park, with the sun just dipping his chin into a swift cloud and a few drops of rain beginning to fall among moist pebbles and dead leaves, it seems to me that I am really a vast net of unpleasant sensation, a net of boredom which enmeshes everything, and down the slack nerves of which run tremors of feeble dis-

gust from the uttermost stars. What a paltry attempt at the poetic that is! I am ashamed of myself. What I mean, of course, is merely that my own nervous system is degraded—perhaps by too much sensation, and sensation too precise.

“Ah, Sahara, those precise sensations! Did you know that there has always been something peculiarly offensive to me in the line of the gums above your upper teeth? On chilly days, too, I have noticed that the part of the chest which shows above your blouse is very apt to be of a bluish hue which I find extraordinarily repulsive. And then, to pass from the physiological to the psychological, how singularly you have misjudged, from the very outset, the sort of stimulus with which to play upon me! If only you had known how to be proud instead of humble, reserved instead of placatory, mysterious instead of dumb! . . . These are extraordinary things to be saying to a woman at the very outset of ‘love’: no doubt you will be simply dumbfounded. ‘How is it possible?’ I hear you asking. ‘Did you not kiss me last night? Surely there was no sham about that? You loved me then—is it possible that love should evaporate so soon?’ . . . Yes, I loved you last night, that is true. When I left my own lodgings and started off in the evening to see you I will not deny that I did so with tremendous excitement, that I had taken the very last care with my appearance, and that all the way, in the street car, my imagination, like an expert contrapuntalist, performed the most amazing feats of virtuosity with the simple theme of

'you.' I saw you burning like a creature of light, alternately fusing and paling with the pulse of fire. I trembled when I thought of you. I could feel waves of psychic blindness go over me periodically, and when at last I climbed the steps to your house I felt as if my head and my body had been somehow separated. . . . But then, when I saw you, these feelings began rapidly to change! I saw something a little coarse in you; I found you to be stupid; the curve of your jaw seemed to me to be too heavy. You manifested also a disposition to abuse those gestures which I had at first found charming. How sick I became of your trick of looking up at me from your pillow with silly admiration, just allowing me a glimpse of your small blue eyes between the fingers of your hand! How I loathed you for the arch way in which you kept turning your back. I responded to these things as you expected, but you did not guess with what weariness and anger.

"However, it was not at all my intention to say things that might injure you—not at all, not at all. What I want intensely, miserably, to make clear to you is that it is not in any real sense you that I thus shamefully betray and abandon, but humanity, the world, and, above all myself. In this particular case, I suppose I might say that the difficulty lies in the fact that when I came to you it was with the last failing spark of my wearied enthusiasm for love-affairs. But it is really far more complicated than that—it is not fair to you or to me to let you suppose that I am merely a jaded

Don Juan. Not so. My love-affairs have been very few, very fugitive; and if now my love for you is as it were, stillborn, it is because at last my faith in beauty seems dead. . . . If you could realize, Sara, how much I *want* to love you! how infinitely healing it would be to me! But I am powerless in this, as I am in everything; I have no gusto for life; I am a mass of complex contradictory impulses that leave me in a mammering and at a stay. When I fall asleep at night it is with the hope that I may never wake. When I wake in the morning, it is with passionate resentment. I look ahead through the day in the faint hope that I may find the promise of one event that will be pleasant. If it happens that I am to dine in the evening with X., then I live through the tedium of the day, and all its exasperating trifles, in expectation of that one hour of pleasure—which, under so great a strain, usually turns out to be rather dull. . . .

“And then, finally, there are my obsessions, which I cannot explain. My latest is a horror of shaving! I cannot think of a razor, of a sharp edge of any sort, without a shudder which touches the very center of my vitality. When I take up my razor in the morning it is almost with a conviction that some obscure impulse will transmit itself to the blade, which will suddenly turn against my weak flesh. . . . By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is a-weary of this great world. . . .”

. . . What an admirable letter! How profoundly it would stir the chords of pity in Sara’s heart! . . . But the pace of the rain was beginning to quicken, a



continual patter came from the dead leaves, and he rose, buttoning his coat. Ten minutes to six. . . . If he walked through the park, slowly, and then by the long way through Essex Street, he would reach the station just in time to meet Sara for dinner. He began walking. Leaves blew along the path before him, came down in streams from the blown trees. Incredible melancholy. All that was needed was a dejected faun shivering in a hollow tree and trying to blow a melody from his rain-soaked reed. Everything was gray in the gray light. Large drops from the boughs of trees pattered on the rim of his hat, and the crook of his stick, becoming wet, rubbed irritatingly on the palm of his hand. Sodden leaves: sodden newspapers: sodden world.

To be or not to be: no, that wasn't the question at all, but whether or not to dine with Sara. To approach her through this silver jungle of rain, with all its bells; to weave himself like a shuttle through this vast and exquisite fabric of mercurial silver, finally coming upon Sara, in a green dress, waiting happily; to see for a flash the clear quality of her face in rain-light, and to hear the first full sound of her voice under an umbrella tense and murmurous with rain; to feel a drop of water on the back of his hand, and to hear her laugh—didn't all this, after all, offer a sort of beauty? . . . Yes, no question, it did. But it was only for the first instant. After that came the tedious necessity of finding a restaurant where they would be safe from the eyes of acquaintances, the necessity of talking and



talking with Sara, of touching her foot under the table, of spending three desolating hours of the evening with her—she wouldn't let him off with less. Agonizing complications. Misery a thousand miles deep. If he did go to her, what should he say? . . . He would greet her wearily. She looked concerned—no, alarmed! "Henry! You're worried. What's the matter?" "Well, Sara—don't be shocked—but to tell the truth I was wondering, all the way here, whether or not to abandon you." . . . Would she cry—grow white? No—she looked far away, at nothing, compressed her lips. "I see." . . . That's what she'd say. "You see, Sahara, in a sense you've become for me, momentarily, a symbol of life itself. And if I speak of abandoning you, what I really mean is the abandonment of everything." He couldn't prevent a touch of *vox humana* getting into that last phrase—it was a shade too much like a sob, but then, anything was permissible when one was dealing with a woman. "I don't think I mean suicide"—this was said slowly and ponderingly: the "think" was, indeed, masterly! . . . But suppose she simply, with a flash of amusement, answered "Why not?" . . . Heavens!

He turned the corner, and there was Sara just as he had foreseen, in the green dress, waiting serenely under her tinkling umbrella. She laughed frankly.

"Henry, you do look dejected!"

"Why shouldn't I? I'm thinking of committing suicide."

"Do!"

"But first I must have some dinner—I'm starving to death!"

"Very well—I'm hungry myself."

"And afterwards—I must kiss you."

"No!"

"Yes. Just behind your left ear."

"What an idea!"

"We'll take a taxi and do a whirl about the city among the rain and puddles."

"That sounds reasonable."

A sudden fury possessed him. He stood still.

"Don't be so damned reasonable! Only death is reasonable."

He saw Sara looking at him with fright, as if she saw something horrible in his face. What did she see? A sharp green-lit vision of him hanging from a gas fixture? . . . A torrent of grief seemed to be released within him, he felt a quickening sensation in his tear-ducts; and, tightly clasping Sara's forearm with his hand, he started walking again.

## SMITH AND JONES

SMITH and Jones, as far as one could tell in the darkness, looked almost exactly alike. Their names might have been interchangeable. So might their clothes, which were apparently rather shabby, though, as they walked quickly and the night was cloudy, it was difficult to be sure. Both of them were extraordinarily articulate. They were walking along the muddy road that led away from a large city and they talked as they went.

"As far as I'm concerned," said Smith, "it's all over. No more women for me. There's nothing in it. It's a damned swindle. Walk right up, gentlemen, and make your bets! The hand is quicker than the eye. Where is the elusive little pea? Ha ha! Both ends against the middle."

He struck a match and lit his pipe; his large pale unshaven face started out of the night.

Jones grumbled to himself. Then turning his head slightly toward Smith, in a somewhat aggressive way, as if he were showing a fang, he began to laugh in a peculiar soft insolent manner.

"Jesus! One would think you were an adolescent. No more women! If there aren't it'll be because you're dead. You were born to be made a fool of by women. You'll buzz round the honey-pot all your days. You

have no sense in these matters, you've never had the courage or the intelligence once and for all to *realize* a woman. Look! here's a parable for you. There are an infinite number of little white clouds stretching one after another across blue space, just like sweet little stepping stones. To each of them is tethered a different-colored child's balloon—I know that would rather badly fracture the spectrum, but never mind. And behold, our angel-child, beautiful and trustful, flies to the first little cloud-island, and seizes the first balloon, enraptured. It's pink. But then he sees the next island, and the next balloon, which is orange. So he lets the first one go, which sails away, and flies vigorously to the next little island. From there he catches sight of a different shade of pink—sublime! intoxicating! and again dashes across an abyss. . . . This lovely process goes on forever. It will never stop."

Smith splashed into a puddle and swore.

"Don't be so damned patronizing, with your little angel-child and toy balloons. I know what I'm talking about. Adolescent? Of course I am—who isn't? The point is, exactly, that I *have* at last realized a woman. That's more, I'll bet, than you've done—you, with your damned negativism!"

"Negativism!—how? But never mind that. Tell me about your woman."

"It must be experienced to be understood."

"Of course—so must death."

"What can I tell you then? You, who have always made it a principle to experience as little as possible!

Your language doesn't, therefore, extend to the present subject. You are still crawling on your hands and knees, bumping into chairs, and mistaking your feet for a part of the floor, or your hands for a part of the ceiling. Stand up! Be a man! It's glorious."

"Was she blonde or brunette?"

"If you insist, she was a negress tattooed with gold and silver. Instead of earrings, she wore brass alarm clocks in her ears, and for some unexplained reason she had an ivory thimble in her left nostril."

Jones laughed: there was a shade of annoyance in his laughter.

"I see. . . . I forgot to mention, by the way, that when the angel-child flew so vigorously from cloud to cloud his wings made a kind of whimpering sound. . . . But go on."

"No, she was neither blonde nor brunette, but, as you suggested, imaginary. She didn't really exist. I thought she did, of course—I had seen her several times quite clearly. She had a voice, hands, eyes, feet—in short, the usual equipment. In point of size she was colossal; in point of speed totally incommensurable. She walked, like Fama, with her head knocking about among the stars. She stepped casually, with one step, from town to town, making with the swish of her skirts so violent a whirlwind that men everywhere were sucked out of houses."

"I recognize the lady. It was Helen of Troy."

"Not at all. Her name, as it happened, was Gleason."

Jones sighed. The two men walked rapidly for

some time in silence. The moon, like a pale crab, pulled clouds over itself, buried itself in clouds with a sort of awkward precision, and a few drops of rain fell.

"Rain!" said Jones, putting up one hand.

"To put out the fires of conscience."

"Gleason? She must be—if your description is accurate—in the theatrical profession? A lady acrobat, a trapeze artist, or a Pullman portress?"

"Wrong again, Jones—if error were, as it ought to be, punishable by death, you'd be a corpse. . . . Suffice it to say that Gleason loved me. It was like being loved by a planet."

"Venus?"

"Mars. She crushed me, consumed me. Her love was a profounder and more fiery abyss than the inferno which Dante, in the same sense, explored. It took me days of circuitous descent, to get even within sight of the bottom; and then, as there were no ladders provided, I plunged headlong. I was at once ignited, and became a tiny luminous spark, which, on being cast forth to the upper world again on a fiery exhalation, became an undistinguished cinder."

"To think a person named Gleason could do all that!"

"Yes, it's a good deal, certainly. I feel disinclined for further explorations of the sort."

"Temporarily, you mean. . . . You disliked the adventure?"

"Oh, no—not altogether! Does one dislike life alto-

gether? Do we hate this walk, this road, the rain, ourselves, the current of blood which, as we walk and talk, our hearts keep pumping and pumping? We like and dislike at the same time. It's like an organism with a malignant fetid cancer growing in it. Cut out the cancer, which has interlaced its treacherous fibers throughout every part, and you extinguish life. What's to be done? In birth, love, and death, in all acts of violence, all abrupt beginnings and abrupt cessations, one can detect the very essence of the business—there one sees, in all its ambiguous nakedness, the beautiful obscene.”

Jones reflected: one could make out that his head was bowed. Smith walked beside him with happy alacrity. It began to rain harder, the trees dripped loudly, but the two men paid no attention.

“The beautiful obscene!” said Jones, suddenly lifting his head. “Certainly that's something to have learned *chez* Gleason! . . . It suggests a good deal. It's like this road—it's dark, but it certainly leads somewhere.”

“Where?”

“That's what we'll discover. Is it centrifugal or centripetal? The road is the former, of course. It leads, as we know, away from civilization into the wilderness, the unknown. But that's no reason for supposing the same to be true of your diagnosis—is it? And yet I wonder.”

He wondered visibly, holding his coat-collar about



his throat with one hand, and showed a disposition to slacken his pace. But Smith goaded him.

"Look here, we've got to keep moving, you know."

"Yes, we've got to keep moving."

They walked for a mile in complete silence. The rain kept up a steady murmur among the leaves of trees, the vague heaving shoulders of which they could see at right and left, and they heard the tinkling of water in a ditch. Their shoes bubbled and squelched, but they seemed to be indifferent to matters so unimportant. However, from time to time they inclined their heads forward and allowed small reservoirs of rain to slide heavily off their felt hats. It was Jones, finally, who began talking again. After a preliminary mutter or two, and a hostile covert glance at his companion, he said:

"Like all very great discoveries, this discovery of yours affords opportunities for a new principle of behavior. You are not a particularly intelligent man, as I've often told you, and as you yourself admit; so you probably don't at all see the implications of your casual observation. As often occurs to you, in the course of your foolish, violent, undirected activity, you have accidentally bumped your head and seen a star. You would never think, however, of hitching your wagon to such a star—which is what I propose to do."

Smith glanced sharply at his companion, and then began laughing on a low meditative note which gradually became shrill and derisive: he even lifted one

knee and slapped it. It was obviously a tremendous joke.

"Just like you, Jones! You're all brain to the soles of your feet. *What* do you propose to do?"

"Don't be a simpleton, or I'll begin by murdering you—instead of ending by doing so."

This peculiar remark was delivered, and received, with the utmost sobriety.

"Of course," said Smith. "You needn't dwell on that, as it's an unpleasant necessity which is fully recognized between us. It doesn't in the least matter whether the event is early or late, does it?"

"What I mean is, that if you are right, and the beautiful obscene is the essence of the business, then obviously one should pursue that course of life which would give one the maximum number of—what shall I say?—perfumed baths of that description. . . . You say that this essence is most clearly to be detected in the simpler violences. In love, birth, death, all abrupt cessations and beginnings. Very good. Then if one is to live completely, to realize life in the last shred of one's consciousness, to become properly incandescent, or *identical* with life, one must put oneself in contact with the strongest currents. One should love savagely, kill frequently, eat the raw, and even, I suppose, be born as often as possible."

"A good idea!"

"I propose to do all these things. It has long been tacitly understood that sooner or later I will murder you, so, as you tactfully suggest, I won't dwell on that.

But I shall be glad to have Gleason's address . . . beforehand."

"Certainly: whenever you like. Telephone Main 220-W (I always liked that W) and ask for Mary."

"The question is: what's to be done about thought? . . . You see, this road of reflection is, after all, centripetal. It involves, inevitably a return to the center, an identification of one's self with the All, with the unconscious *primum mobile*. But thought, in its very nature, involves a separation of one's self from the—from the—"

"Unconscious?"

"From the unconscious. . . . We must be careful not to go astray at this point. One shouldn't begin by trying to *be* unconscious—not at all! One might as well be dead. What one should try to get rid of is consciousness of *self*. Isn't that it?"

Smith gave a short laugh, at the same time tilting his head to let the rain run off onto his feet. "Anything you say, professor. I trust you blindly. Anyway, I know that my pleasantest moments with Gleason were those in which I most completely lost my awareness of personality, of personal identity. Yes, it's beautiful and horrible, the way one loses, at such moments, everything but a feeling of animal force. . . . Analogously, one should never permit conversation at meals. And it was decidedly decadent of Cyrano to carry on an elaborate monologue in couplets while committing a murder—oh, decidedly. Quite the wrong thing. One's awareness, on such occasions, should be

of nothing, nothing but murder—there should be no overlapping fringe which could busy itself with such boyisms as poetry or epigram. One should, in short, *be* a murder. . . . Do I interpret you, correctly?"

Jones, at this, looked at Smith with a quick uneasiness. Smith appeared to be unconscious of this regard, and was as usual walking with jaunty alacrity. The way he threw out his feet was extremely provocative—the angle of his elbows was offensive. His whole bearing was a deliberate, a calculated insult.

"Quite correctly," said Jones sharply, keeping his eye on Smith.

"Here's a haystack," replied the latter, equably, but also a little sneeringly. "Shall we begin with arson? We can go on, by degrees, to murder."

"By all means."

The two men could be seen jumping the ditch, and laboriously climbing over a slippery stone wall. Several matches sputtered and went out, and then a little blaze lighted the outstretched hands and solemn intent faces of Jones and Smith. They drew out and spread the dry hay over the blaze, the flames fed eagerly, and the stone wall and the black trunk of an elm tree appeared to stagger toward them out of the darkness.

"I think that will do," observed Smith cheerfully.

They climbed back over the wall and resumed their walk. The rain had become a drizzle, and the moon, in a crack between the clouds, showed for a second the white of an eye. Behind them, the fire began to spout, and they observed that they were preceded, on the pud-

dled road, by oblique drunken shadows. They walked rapidly.

"A mere bagatelle," Smith went on, after a time. "But there's a farm at the top of the hill, so we can, as it were, build more stately mansions. . . . Were you aware, at the moment of ignition, of a kind of co-awareness with the infinite?"

"Don't be frivolous."

"Personally, I found it a little disappointing. . . . I don't like these deliberate actions. Give me the spontaneous, every time. That's one thing I particularly like about Gleason. The dear thing hasn't the least idea what she's doing, or what she's going to do next. If she decided to kill you, you'd never know it, because you'd be dead. . . . Not at all like you, Jones. You've got a devil of a lot to unlearn!"

Jones reflected. He took off his hat and shook it. His air was profoundly philosophical.

"True. I have. I'll put off a decision about the farm till we get to it. I suppose, by the same token, you'd like me to give up my habit of strict meditation on the subject of *your* death?"

"Oh, just as you like about that!" . . . Smith laughed pleasantly. "I assure you it's not of the smallest consequence. . . . It occurs to me, by the way, somewhat irrelevantly, that in your philosophy of incandescent sensation one must allow a place for the merely horrible. I never, I swear, felt more brilliantly alive than when I saw, once, a negro sitting in a cab with his throat cut. He unwound a bloody towel for

the doctor, and I saw, in the chocolate color, three parallel red smiles—no, gills. It was amazing.”

“A domestic scene? . . . *Crime passionnelle?*”

“No—a trifling misunderstanding in a barber-shop. This chap started to take out a handkerchief; the other chap thought it was a revolver; and the razor was quicker than the handkerchief. . . . The safety razor ought to be abolished, don’t you think?”

Jones, without answer, jumped the ditch and disappeared in the direction of the farm. Smith leaned against the wall, laughing softly to himself. After a while there were six little spurts of light one after another in the darkness, hinting each time at a nose and fingers, and then four more. Nothing further happened. The darkness remained self-possessed, and presently Jones reappeared, muttering.

“No use! It’s too wet, and I couldn’t find any kindling.”

“Don’t let that balk you, my dear Jones! Ring the door-bell and ask for a little kerosene. Why not kill the old man, ravish his daughter, and then burn up the lot? It would be a good night’s work.”

“Damn you! You’ve done enough harm already.”

There was something a little menacing in this, but Smith was unperturbed.

“What the devil do you mean?” he answered. “Intellectually I’m a child by comparison with you. I’m an adolescent.”

“You know perfectly well what I mean—all this,” and Jones gave a short ugly sweep of his arm toward



the blazing haystack and, beyond that, the city. The moon came out, resting her perfect chin on a tawny cloud. The two men regarded each other strangely.

"Nonsense!" Smith then exclaimed. "Besides you'll have the satisfaction of killing me. That ought to compensate. And Gleason! think of Gleason! She'll be glad to see you. She'll revel in the details of my death."

"Will she?"

"Of course she will. . . . She's a kind of sadist, or something of the sort. . . . How, by the way, do you propose to do it? We've never—come to think of it—had an understanding on that point. Would you mind telling me, or do you regard it as a sort of trade secret? . . . Just as you like!"

Jones seemed to be breathing a little quickly.

"No trouble at all—but I don't know! I shall simply, as you suggest, wait for an inspiration."

"How damned disquieting! Also, Jones, it's wholly out of character, and you'll have to forgive me if, for once, I refuse to believe you. What the deuce is this walk for, if not for your opportunity? You're bound to admit that I was most compliant. I accepted your suggestion without so much as a twitter—didn't I? Very unselfish of me, I think! . . . But of course, it had to come."

The two men were walking, by tacit agreement, at opposite sides of the road; they had to raise their voices. Still, one would not have said that it was a quarrel.



"Oh yes, it had to come. It was clearly impossible that both of us should live!"

"Quite. . . . At the same time this affair is so exquisitely complex, and so dislocated, if I may put it so, into the world of the fourth dimension, that I'm bound to admit that while I recognize the necessity I don't quite grasp the cause. . . ."

"You're vulgar, Smith."

"Am I? . . . Ah, so that's it—I'm vulgar, I seize life by the forelock! . . . I go about fornicating, thieving, card-cheating, and murdering, in my persistent, unreflective low-grade sort of way, and it makes life insupportable for you. Here, now, is Gleason. How that must simply infuriate you! Three days in town, and I have a magnificent planetary love-affair like that—burnt to a crisp! Ha ha! And you, all the while, drinking tea and reading Willard Gibbs. I must say it's damned funny."

Jones made no reply. His head was thrust forward—he seemed to be brooding. His heavy breathing was quite audible, and Smith, after an amused glance toward him, went on talking.

"Lots of lights suddenly occur to me—lights on this extraordinary, impenetrable subject—take down my words, Jones, this is my death-bed speech! . . . I spoke, didn't I, of the beautiful obscene, and of the inextricable manner in which the two qualities are everywhere bound up together? The beautiful and the obscene. The desirable and the disgusting. I also compared this state of things with an organism in

which a cancer was growing—which one tries to excise. . . . Well, Jones, you're the beautiful and I'm the obscene: you're the desirable and I'm the disgusting: and in some rotten way we've got tangled up together. . . . You, being the healthy organism, insist on having the cancer removed. But remember: I warned you! If you do so, it's at your own peril. . . . However, it's silly to warn you, for of course you have no more control over the situation than I have, or Gleason has. The bloody conclusion lies there, and we walk soberly towards it. . . . Are you sorry?"

"No!"

"Well then, neither am I. Let's move a little faster! . . . Damn it all, I *would* like to see Gleason again! You were perfectly right about that. . . . Do you know what she said to me?"

Smith, at this point, suddenly stopped, as if to enjoy the recollection at leisure. He opened his mouth and stared before him, in the moonlight, with an odd bright fixity. Jones, with the scantiest turn of his head, plodded on, so that Smith had, perforce, to follow.

"She said she'd like to live with me—that she'd support me. By George! What do you think of that? . . . 'You're a dear boy,' she said, 'you fascinate me!' 'Fascinate!' That's the best thing I do. Don't I fascinate you, Jones? Look at my eyes! Don't I fascinate you? . . . Ha, ha! . . . Yes, I have the morals of a snake. I'm graceful, I'm all curves, there's nothing straight about me. Gleason got dizzy look-

ing at me, her head swayed from side to side, her eyes were lost in a sort of mist, and then she fell clutching at me like a paralytic, and talking the wildest nonsense. Could you do that, Jones, do you think? . . . Never! It's all a joke to think of your going to see Gleason. And if you told her what had happened she'd kill you. Yes, you'd look like St. Sebastian when Gleason got through with you. . . . Say something! Don't be so damned glum. Anybody'd suppose it was *your* funeral."

"Oh, go on talking! I like the sound of your voice."

"And then to think of your pitiful attempt to set that barn on fire! Good Lord, with half a dozen matches. . . . That's what comes of studying symbolic logic and the rule of phase. . . . Really, I don't know what you'll do without me, Jones! You're like a child, and when I'm dead, who's going to show you, as the wit said, how to greet the obscene with a cheer? . . . However, I wouldn't bother about that rock if I were you—aren't you premature?"

This last observation sounded a little sharp.

Jones had certainly appeared to be stooping toward a small loose fragment of rock by the roadside, but he straightened up with smiling alacrity.

"My shoe-lace," he said, cynically. "It's loose. I think I'll retie it."

"Pray do! Why not?"

"Very well! If you don't mind waiting!"

Jones gave a little laugh. He stooped again, fumbled for a second at his shoe, then suddenly shot out a

snake-like hand toward the rock. But Smith meanwhile had made a gleaming gesture which seemed to involve Jones's back.

"Ah!" said Jones, and slid softly forward into a puddle.

"Are you there?"

Smith's query was almost humorous. As it received no reply, and Jones lay motionless in his puddle, Smith took him by the coat-collar, dragged him to the edge of the ditch, and rolled him in. The moon poured a clear green light on this singular occurrence. It showed Smith examining his hands with care, and then wiping them repeatedly on the wet grass and rank jewel-weed. It showed him relighting his pipe—which had gone out during the rain—with infinite leisure. One would have said, at the moment, that he looked like a tramp. And, finally, it showed him turning back in the direction he had come from, and setting off cheerfully toward the city: alone, but with an amazing air, somehow, of having always been alone.

## THE ESCAPE FROM FATUITY

I AM a bachelor : aged thirty (within a month) : not very clever, and rather shy. Perhaps I do myself an injustice when I say I am not very clever. In the right circumstances I can be amusing—but the right circumstances, to tell the truth, are few. For this, when I am inclined to be a little self-indulgent, I blame my shyness. All my life I have been afraid of making a fool of myself. It always seems to me that my appearance (say, when shaving—thrusting forward a small lathered chin, or turning back the pink lobe of an ear) has about it something fatuous. Decidedly there is something weak, a peculiar offensive elasticity, in my mouth, a wandering shallowness in the eyes, which are also a little too close together. In my adolescence I used to make a practice of setting my teeth very firmly together, and thrusting my jaw consciously and pugnaciously forward. This had, surprisingly, an effect—my jaw today is what the writer of fiction calls “prominent.” But the pugnacity is a fake. When I find, occasionally, that people are afraid of me, I am completely taken by surprise. I give myself away at once by being tremulously amiable—I agitate my amiability as a dog would its tail. When I walk in the street, among crowds, I am painfully self-conscious. A frightful curiosity impels me to

look into the eyes of everybody, but I am capable at most of only a wavering and sidelong glance, and then, particularly if my glance is returned, I drop my eyes weakly to the ground, and experience at the same moment an awful sensation of hollowness and exile. It is equally unpleasant to me if I catch sight of myself reflected in a mirror or shopwindow—weakling! idiot! —I say to myself. I suddenly detest my pale coarse profile, my uncomfortably shaped head, which makes any hat look ridiculous, and the effeminate smallness of my feet. Sometimes I am so confused by such moments of self-vision that I collide with some other pedestrian, which makes my self-contempt all the more hideous.

What I seek, of course, in the eyes of my fellow-pedestrians, is approval, respect, an assurance that I am not, after all, such a fool. This search is perhaps the guiding principle of my life. If you knew how pleased I am by even the most casual sign of approval or interest, how I am warmed by it, how I long, instantly, to become garrulously confidential! What happens, of course, is that I at once make a perfect ass of myself: I simply don't know what to do, how to adjust myself. No amount of meditation on the subject has helped me. When I am reading (I am very fond of reading) I frequently pause to luxuriate in a feeling of wisdom—"Yes," I think, "I understand that perfectly, I am really an intelligent man." How is it that I cannot use this understanding in the practical things of life? I do not know.



Particularly with women. Would you believe it, but in all my life I have never had a love-affair! I adore women, but they simply terrify me. They are indispensable to me. I think about them continually, I dress carefully in order to be pleasing to them, I memorize anecdotes that I think might amuse them; but when I am face to face with any one woman I am conscious of only one thing—the weak elasticity of my mouth. I have often, when left alone for a moment with a woman, been seized with a violent fit of trembling. I stammer inanities, or am completely tongue-tied; and when I see amusement come into the woman's eyes, all is over with me. Why is the situation so appallingly complex? Afterwards, when I rehearse such a scene, I always see the absurdity of it—I see how, even at the worst moment, I could have saved the situation if I had only remained self-possessed. Of course, as I thus reënact the scene, I make it impossibly romantic: I make nothing of throwing bridges across psychological voids. "Don't, I beg you, draw hasty conclusions about me from my apparently fatuous behavior; my fatuity is occasioned simply and solely by the horrible intensity of my desire to interest you. If only we didn't have to go through this preliminary stage of mutual exploration, of tactile adjustment, which is so fatal to me, and could pass direct to the simplicity of intimacy, you would, I am sure, find me a very decent sort of creature." Yes, I imagine myself saying this sort of thing in a calm, low, magnetic voice, I imagine the look of eloquent sympathy,



admiration, even, with which it is received. The note of rich intimacy has been rightly struck, and after that it is very simple: our private gondola awaits us at the door, music scatters its gold and moonlight its silver over the velvet blackness of water, the mere touching of hand against hand is an exchange of the most profound sympathies. "You are beautiful," I whisper. "I adore you," she whispers in return.

Ridiculous, isn't it? But tragic, too, if you realize how fearfully my whole life centers about such things. For example, I have been literally kept alive, lately, by my recollections of an adventure (if it can be called such) which occurred to me almost a year ago. I go over it every night, when I am alone, rediscovering forgotten bits of dialogue, forgotten aspects, and also, I am afraid, touching up the poor narrative as photographers touch up defective photographs. As for the actual ending of it, I have played the most fantastic variations upon it! It is then, indeed, that I experience the real agony of pleasure in it. The precise variation depends on my particular mood. I even, occasionally, when self-contempt is uppermost, see the thing exactly and horribly as it was, and indulge in an orgy of self-derision, after which I drown my loathing in whisky.

It was an important day in my life; I had managed to get an appointment to see the advertising manager of a large publishing house, with a view to securing from him a commission for doing the illustrations for a whole series of books. (I forgot to mention that I am an artist—not a very good one, and most of

my work has been "commercial.") I wrapped up a few drawings, saw that my appearance was immaculate—for I don't believe in the usual artistic affectation of oddity—and, allowing myself considerably more than the necessary time, set out for my destination by bus. I sat down inside the bus, and immediately a girl sat down beside me. I am tempted to say that she was remarkably beautiful—no doubt, in the year that has elapsed, my imagination has been of some assistance to her; but certainly she was more than merely pretty, she was hardly more than twenty-two, she was charmingly dressed. She carried an armful of books—the uppermost, of which I at once read the title, was "An Introduction to Natural Philosophy." When she glanced at me once or twice I saw that her eyes were a delicious mysterious smoky blue, and that her mouth, of which the lips were thin and exquisitely curved, was at the same time humorous and cruel. I was enormously intrigued by her—I speculated wildly on the possibility of "picking her up," but, as usual, did nothing, for I saw my nose reflected in the window of the bus and thought, "Weakling! idiot! what woman would look twice at you?" Nor did she, on her side, take the slightest interest in me. Her hands lay relaxed over the pile of books, her eyes looked past me into the street—she appeared to be deep in thought; no doubt, of Natural Philosophy.

And it was without altering her expression in the very slightest, or making the least perceptible motion of her body that, none the less, suddenly, she pressed

her knee gently, and with fastidious conscious precision, against mine. I was thrown into a panic. What should I do—retort in kind? I did retort—trembling with excitement—and she received my reply with no indication of displeasure. Amazing! Incredible! The bus jolted on its way and these two human knees, total strangers to each other, carried on in silence a dialogue of charming candor. “But is it not slightly fatuous,” I said to myself, “to sit here as dumb as a fish and allow this to go on indefinitely—will she not expect me to say something to her, so that the pleasure of the acquaintance may not be left entirely to our knees?” I looked at her, on this, hoping to find that when our eyes met a mutual light of some sort would shine and a conversation rise naturally from our hearts. No such thing! We looked at each other calmly, pleasantly, steadily, luxuriated in the look, her eyes as smokily mysterious as ever, her mouth no less humorously cruel; and even while we looked, our knees, as if independent of us, again nudged and caressed each other.

I resigned myself, after this, giving up all idea of any remark about the weather. To have opened a conversation with a remark on the weather would have seemed too preposterously frigid, in the light of the burning intimacy that already existed between us. No, what was needed was some entirely simple question or observation, something that would appear to be nothing but the picking up of a dropped thread; but though I had at the moment, for all the sacred excitement that

possessed me, a clear perception of this, I could find no comment that did not seem fatuous. It seemed a little late in the day to inquire if she had slept well; besides I was not sure that I had at my command the precise colloquialism of tone and phrase necessary to the occasion. Yet the question was the only one, such was my luck, that occurred to me, and it babbled itself unceasingly in my consciousness, to the exclusion of all others. It did occur to me that I might, with the utmost simplicity, pick up off her knee the "Introduction to Natural Philosophy," thus establishing our intimacy as not only implicit, but express. But to tell the truth, my courage failed me. What if she did not intend the thing to go any further? The scene, in that case, might be awful. I might even be arrested. What a fool I should have been! My ears burned at the thought. I was consumed with my imagined mortification. So I did nothing—beyond exchanging with her looks of inexpressible ardor. It was an extraordinary sensation, for I positively *felt* an unaccustomed brilliance and depth in my eyes, as I felt also the same power in hers. Was this imaginary? Is there some natural physiological explanation of this phenomenon? Was this electric exchange between us observable by anyone else? I was embarrassed at the time by the thought that it must indeed be observable, and from time to time therefore turned off the current.

The crucial moment came abruptly: she rose to get out of the bus. I suppose I had prepared myself unconsciously for this, for I sprang up instantly and

followed. She half turned towards me as she alighted on the pavement, and I asked, with a fine (but tremulous) casualness:

"May I carry your books for you?"

She smiled, with a trace of hardness.

"No, thanks—they're no trouble."

As she did not follow this up, but looked vaguely away, I took a despairing plunge.

"Which way do you go?"

"To the post-office . . . I'm not sure where it is." Certainly this was not a rebuke, though on the other hand it was not very encouraging. I murmured that I thought I knew where the post-office was. And on the way thither—it was only a block—we kept up a desultory, and, for me, highly unsatisfactory conversation. Somehow I couldn't strike the right note. Was she stupid—or was she bored? I was oppressed by a feeling that we had become strangers, that our departure from the bus had been a violent separation. We groped for the key to a lost intimacy, and could not find it. Or was she, on the whole, satisfied with the loss?

"Are you a philosopher?" I inquired.

"Pardon?"

The look she turned upon me was ingenuous to the point of blankness.

"Do you study philosophy?"

"Oh, no: I'm studying dentistry."

"Where do you intend to practice?"

"In Honolulu."

"Oh! On the ukulele?"

"Pardon?"

"Practice on the ukulele," I explained fatuously.

"No, on the natives."

"But have they any teeth?"

"The best in the world."

This was the end of our dialogue for the moment, and as we approached the first of a dozen inquiry windows in the central post-office I confess I felt somewhat dashed. "The breaking waves dashed high," I said to myself, "on a stern and rockbound coast." At the first inquiry window we were told that we would have to take the lift and inquire at window number 421. I demonstrated my usefulness by finding the lift. I again demonstrated it by finding the window. Here at once began a long discussion as to the possible whereabouts of a lost letter—"of great importance." The clerk filled out a form and went away. I felt it necessary to remind her of my presence: she appeared to have forgotten me.

"Is it a love letter?" I asked.

"Are love letters of great importance?"

"Surely as important as anything."

She narrowed her eyes on me at this—she was singularly attractive at that moment—and smiled a little.

"Not as important as ambition. I am very ambitious."

The clerk reappeared, and I was again horribly forgotten. This time, in the conversation on the lost



letter, I caught her name—Christine Treadway. Also her former address—3 Trevor Square. It developed that the letter would not be in the central post-office but perhaps in the district office. Christine and the clerk exchanged a long, baffled, but intimate look. I felt very much out of it, and took from her arm the book on Natural Philosophy, and, while she reflected, read. Mere pretence, of course: it did not interest me in the least, and I replaced it.

We descended in the lift and went out. We crossed the street. She paused on the corner, and remarked vaguely, as if to the post-office:

"I must take a bus here."

"Won't you have tea with me?"

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Well, then—lunch tomorrow?"

"Let me see. . . . Yes! I'll lunch with you tomorrow."

"One o'clock?"

"Oh, wait. . . . No, it's impossible. I'm sorry, I'd forgotten—I have an engagement for lunch. Very important. Ambition again!"

"Curse your ambition!"

"Pardon?"

"I can't ask you to dine with me either tonight or tomorrow night, as I have engagements for both. But how about lunch or dinner the day after?"

An amused sorrow, the minutest of detectable gleams, signaled from her eyes.



"What a pity! I leave London for good tomorrow night."

"Then for heaven's sake have tea with me today!"

"I wish I could." She turned, with an exquisite reluctance, towards the bus that had stopped. "Good-by!" she said, putting out her hand.

"Good-by!" I cried. She got into the bus, and I walked away.

That was the end of it: that was all there was. I felt suffocated. I walked a block in the wrong direction before I realized where I was going. I pulled myself together and remembered my appointment. When I reached the office I found that I was too late, that the advertising manager had given me up and gone away for the week-end, and that my chance was lost. It didn't seem to matter. All I thought about was Christine, the dentist, setting out for Honolulu. Should I telegraph her at 3 Trevor Square? No, she wouldn't get the telegram. There was nothing to be done—nothing.

"Oh, my God," I thought, "why was I so stupid? Why did I try to be frivolous? Why wasn't I serious?"

Those questions have cursed me ever since. I have never decided in what, precisely, my mistake lay. Nor have I decided whether she told the truth when she said that she was going away. Is she, perhaps, still in London? Too late, now, in any event. My chance was lost. How near I came to justifying my exist-

ence, to escaping from the fatuous! But now I am condemned to it for the rest of my life. Even if I could find her in the directory or whatever, I should not now have the courage to face her again. She will always think of me as a perfect fool.

## HEY, TAXI!

THE illuminated clock on the pavement before the brightly lighted lunchroom said five minutes to twelve. It was beginning to rain harder, a cold February rain, which threatened to turn to snow. Mixed with the black rain fell a few sodden snowflakes. The lunchroom was nearly empty. The after-theater crowd had come and gone, leaving behind it, on the wide arms of the armchairs, stained plates, empty bowls and cups with spoons in them, crumpled napkins flung on the floor, wet newspapers. Even in disorder it was colorful and picturesque; and it was warm. The bowls of fruit on marble counters, the salads and pies arrayed richly in glass cases gave an almost tropic air of luxury. O'Brien, a taxi-driver, who was finishing his bowl of cornflakes and cream and a cup of coffee, looked sleepily about him. He liked it—the warmth and color almost put him to sleep. He was so tired that he could hardly eat. A hard day; but profitable; he would be glad to get to bed. A steady succession of short runs from noon to six o'clock; and then, one of those freak fares, a man at the Touraine who wanted to go to Plymouth and back in the six hours before midnight. Judas! what a night. It had been an exhausting drive, pitch black, everything drowned in rain. The windshield wiper had to be moved every

two minutes. All that the headlights showed was a ghost-dance of rain, swirling, mixed with snow, and an unending inferno of puddles, rivers and mud. His eyes ached. He wished to God he didn't have the drive to the garage ahead of him—a mile and a half. . . . However, after that it would take him less than fifteen minutes to hit the hay. . . . He shoved his ticket and the change over the cashier counter, turned up his collar, and went out. Twelve o'clock.

He had left his muddy taxi, flag down, in a deserted alley round the corner from the lunch-room. There was no time-limit there, the cops wouldn't bother him. Judas priest, what a rotten night! He stepped into an invisible puddle, cold water came through his shoes. Squelch, squelch. Hell's delight. He crawled stiffly into his seat and pushed the self-starter. Nga—nga—nga—nga—nga—it didn't start. Dead as a door-nail. Spark on—gas on—he pushed it again. Nga—nga—nga—nga—nga—nga nn! what the hell—cold probably. He primed it and was about to try once more when a girl, who must have come up from behind, made him jump by suddenly saying into his ear, "Hey, taxi!" Her hand was on his sleeve, and she laughed when she saw him jump. She seemed to be slightly drunk. Laughing, she showed, under the street lamp, several gold teeth. Her hat was sodden with rain, the feather boa round her neck was bedraggled, her wet pale face glistened.

"What the hell," said O'Brien, and disengaging his arm roughly, again pushed the self-starter. Nga—nga

—nga! . . . No response. He heard his door slam, and, turning round, discovered that the girl had got in. He was furious. "Well, I'll be—" He banged on the glass and shouted, waving his arm. "Get out of there!" She didn't move. He could hear her laughing. "Jesus Christ!" he muttered. "What's the idea?" He sat, puzzled, for a moment: the problem seemed almost more than he could cope with, fantastic, horrible. It merely revealed to him his abysmal tiredness. He crawled out of his seat and opened the door. Rain struck his cheek, the door-handle was wet.

"Come on, Liz," he said. "Get out."

As she made no reply he put his head inside and stared at her. A smell of wet face-powder. She sat still in the far corner, smiling, showing a gold tooth.

"Come on!" he repeated. "You can't ride with me."

"I didn't say I wanted to ride with you, did I?"

O'Brien was taken aback.

"Well, what's the idea? Are you kidding me?"

She gave a peal of laughter, lifting up her feet from the floor in delight.

"Sure I'm kidding you," she giggled. "All I want is to sit down!"

"Oh, you do, now! You just want to sit down and have a nice little rest in popper's taxi!"

"Sweet popper!" she cooed. "Come on in and sit down. You're letting the draught in."

"You come on out before I drag you out!"

"Oo! Isn't he rough!"

"One—two—"

"If you touch me I'll scream, I swear to God I will! . . . Don't you dare! . . . Ow, you dirty dog, let go of my arm! Let go!" . . . She screamed, as if experimentally, her blue eyes uninterruptedly bright with amusement. He dropped her arm, astonished. Then, while he stared, silent, she added, taking off her wet hat and giving her bobbed yellow hair a shake, "You shouldn't be so rough, Charlie—that'll make a bruise on my arm. . . . And now that you've come in, for God's sake shut the door! It's cold."

"Are you drunk?" He sat down, as if merely temporarily, on the edge of the seat, wondering what to do.

"Sure I'm drunk. You got to feel good *sometimes*, haven't you?"

"Well, you oughter be ashamed of yourself."

She slapped his cheek lightly, by way of administering an affectionate reproach. He seized her wrist and twisted it savagely. She screeched. Her face became hard and furious.

"Say, what the hell are you doing!" . . . She yanked her hand away, put her wrist to her mouth, and sucked it, absorbed, as if utterly forgetting him. In the silence he heard the rain pattering irregularly on the taxi roof. A shower of needles. He felt as if he were going to fall asleep, stared at her uncomprehending, shivered a little.

"Come on, kid," he said, altering his tone. "You know you can't stay here. I'm taking the boat round

to the garage. I'm dog tired and I want to hit the hay."

"Who's stopping you? I'm not stopping you!"

"Where do you live, then?"

She eyed him distrustfully, with a hard childlike guile.

"What do you want to know for? Bah, you make me sick."

"If it's on my way, I'll drop you there."

"Oh, you will, will you! Very kind of you, I'm sure. . . . Not a chance, Charlie, I'm wise!"

"What the hell are you talking about? . . . Come on, now, be a good kid and get out."

She looked at him, smiling. She leaned toward him, smelling of perfume, and smiled ingratiatingly, tilting her pale face a little to one side. She put her hand, with a very large wedding ring, on his knee, and gently squeezed it.

"Don't you like me, Charlie?" she chirruped.

He put his arm quickly around her waist—she was soaking wet—and picked her up bodily. She screamed. "Let me go, you devil! Let me go, or I'll break every damned window in your cab!" She struggled. As he tried to drag her toward the open door she struck his face, kicked in every direction, and finally had the brilliant idea of beating him over the eyes repeatedly with her wet velvet hat. Rain-water stung his eyes, blinded him. He dropped her onto the seat again. Her boa had fallen off, and her dress, pulled up to her



knees and twisted, showed a pale blue satin petticoat and gray silk legs, mud-splashed.

"Oo! How strong you are, Charlie. Regular cave-man stunt. But don't try it again, let me tell you! or I'll smash your windows for you." She drew away into the corner of the seat again, panting a little, and smiling apprehensively. Then she added, "Oh, gee! look at my petticoat!" She giggled, and gave a flounce to her skirt in an unsuccessful attempt to cover her legs. "You don't mind looking at my legs, do you, Charlie! They're easy to look at. . . . Say, my skirt's awful wet—I think I'll take it off and hang it up to dry. . . ."

"What are you trying to do, get me pinched?" O'Brien pulled the door shut and sat down. "You're a tough baby, all right! . . ." He leaned back and for a second closed his eyes. With eyes shut, he saw a long road swarming at him with sparkling puddles, rivers running, and a spotlight full of rain.

"Sure, I'm tough. I'm so tough, I spit brass! Ha, ha!" She was immensely amused by this, and rocked back and forth, laughing, and looking at him with cunning blue eyes, sidelong.

"Well, you oughter be ashamed to say it, a young kid like you! . . . And all boozed up like an old war-horse. . . . Judas! . . . Where'd you get it? Who gave it to you?"

"None of your damned business who gave it to me. I've been given worse things, let me tell you! . . . It

was a friend of mine gave it to me." She was coarsely defiant.

"Well, he must be a crumby kind of friend, getting you all tanked up like this on rotten whisky and then leaving you out in the rain like an old cat! *Some* friend."

"When I ask for your opinion of my friends, you can give it! . . ."

"Oh! Is that so!"

"Yes—that's so! . . . And my friend's a cop—you can put that in your pipe and smoke it. You make me tired."

"A cop! . . . Tell it to the marines."

"A cop, I said! Do you understand English?"

"Now and then."

"Well, I guess this is one of the thens. . . . Say, Charlie, you haven't got a cigarette, have you?" Wheeling, she slid her arm under his and put her cheek against his shoulder. He looked sleepily at her, unmoving. They remained thus for a moment, hearing the rain on the sides and roof of the taxi—a delicate irregular pricking of needlepoints. Now and then a snowflake, large and heavy, veered past one of the windows. . . . Recollecting himself, pulling himself back again from the verge of a dream, he fished out a cigarette for her and struck a match. Puff—puff. The match, flaring once, twice, showed clear blue eyes, pupils narrowed, under pale golden eyebrows delicately arched like the feelers of a moth. The white nose slightly cruel, rather fine.

"Thanks, Charlie. . . . Nice boy! . . . Snuggle up, let's be comfortable!" She gave a little wriggle, sliding her arm further under his. Her left hand, with its ring, fell upon his, which lay on his canvas coat, and bending her fingers she thrust them delicately, exploringly, up his sleeve. He did not move, merely swayed slightly.

"Sure my friend's a cop." She went on, equably. . . . "Don't you believe me?"

"Oh, I'll swallow anything!" He smiled.

"But I didn't see him tonight. . . . I couldn't find him."

"You went looking for him?"

"All around—everywhere. Damned cold and wet, too! I'm soaked."

"What did you want him for?" He suddenly realized that his eyes had shut and that his chin had dropped onto his sheepskin collar. The rough touch startled him.

"I wanted some money. I'm strapped—absolutely not a thin dime tonight. . . . And the landlady took my key away this morning."

"Oh! she did, did she! You didn't pay the rent?"

"No, you poor simp! It was because the other lodgers complained." She tittered. "The old man in the next room to mine watched me like a hawk. I guess he thought—ha, ha!" . . . She blew a cloud of smoke. "I gave him the cold shoulder, you see, and last night when he found my friend was there

with me—he went down to the kitchen with the glad news.”

“Say, kid—you ought not to do it! You’ll get into trouble.”

“Mind your own business, Charlie!” . . . Her tone was friendly, but sharp. . . . “I’m no chicken.”

“You said a mouthful, Queenie! . . . How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Seventeen—and an alley-cat! . . . Judas.”

She slapped his face. He smiled stupidly, and she slapped it again.

“You shut up! You can’t say things like that to me! . . . Not much.”

She smoked, staring at him. She seemed to be examining him appraisingly, resting her blue eyes in turn on his mouth, his nose, his chin, eyes, canvas coat. Her eyes were close to his, dark-pupilled, her cheek still rested against his shoulder. He returned her gaze, somber and expressionless. He blinked repeatedly, the lids falling slowly, involuntarily, and his head at the same time nodding forward in jerks. With each nod and blink the road rushed at him, a soft interminable torrent, sparkling and seething. Each time, opening his eyes again to exclude the vision, he smiled at the girl’s face, so startlingly near, smiled apologetically.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Flora, Flora des Neiges.”

“Oh! You’re a Canuck.”

"Do I look it?"

"No—you don't."

"My mother was Scotch. That's where I get my yellow hair."

"I guess you got it out of a bottle."

"Like hell I did! That's fourteen carat. All gold to the roots." She shook it against his cheek, smiling, showing a sharp golden eye-tooth.

"Well—when did you come down here?"

"In October. I ran away. My pa's got a farm in Vermont. . . ."

He appeared not to be listening. He was looking out of the window, under the street lamp, watching the swirling of snow and rain—there was more snow, now. All of a sudden, turning, he said:

"Well, Flora, what's the idea? Where are you going to sleep tonight? . . ."

"Me? What's the matter with this?"

"Oh! And supposing some cop happens to come down here? That'd look pretty, wouldn't it! It'd sound nice to the judge, wouldn't it! . . . Yes, it would not!"

He was derisive, but at the same time profoundly inert, relaxed. The warmth of the girl's body was pleasant, and the clasp of her thumb and finger round his right wrist had a curious effect on him. He did not stir, did not feel like stirring. His money was safe enough. She couldn't get it without waking him. Supposing—supposing—he might give her a couple of dollars to go—but where would she go? Not to his

own room. No . . . nor a hotel. She was too young-looking. . . . Supposing—supposing—what was it he was thinking of? Out into the country? Concord or Framingham? Brown rivers cut off his view, and he stared into a vast red-edged spotlight filled with rain. . . . The girl was saying:

“There won’t be any cops here till five o’clock. We could go for a little drive in the parks before that. Out to Jamaica Pond or something like that. . . .”

“Sure. . . . Wake me at five! If you’re waking call me early!”

He would have to explain at the garage. A breakdown somewhere. Hanover Four Corners. . . .

“. . . My friend, the one I ran away with I mean, worked in a drugstore in Cambridge, shaking sodas. He gave me the slip. I didn’t care much, because he paid my fare down here, and that was the chief thing. Oh—he had a swell line of talk! Couldn’t he sling the syllables! . . .”

“Those funny guys make me tired.”

“Don’t be such a gloom, Charlie! . . . Anybody’d think this was your dear mother’s funeral.”

“Ah—you make me tired.” He gave a long shiver, shutting his eyes.

“Going to sleep, darling? Put your head down, there! That’s right.”

He rested his cheek against her head, felt her hand pass across his forehead. Hanover Four Corners was a queer procession of stilted sandwich-men. They stepped briskly, wheeled, waving their long stilts, their

longer and longer stilts, their stilt scrapers, a babbling forest of stilt scrapers, very very tall, and high up among them, invisible were the small white faces which said *Hanover Four Corners, Hanovorners!*

The girl extinguished her cigarette on the window sill and composed herself comfortably, keeping her arm locked into his and her hand on his wrist. For a moment she gazed, broodingly, straight ahead through the front windows, into the rain. Her lower lip drooped slightly, relaxed and sullen. Jesus! she thought. Jesus! . . . snow on the taxi roof like a wedding-cake! . . . After a moment she too was asleep.



## THE DARK CITY

### I.

His greatest pleasure in life came always at dusk. Its prelude was the reading of the evening paper in the train that took him out of the city. By long association the very unfolding of the grimy ink-smelling sheets was part of the ritual: his dark eyes dilated, he felt himself begin to "grin," the staggering load of business detail, under which he had struggled all day in the office, was instantly forgotten. He read rapidly, devoured with rapacious eyes column after column—New York, London, Paris, Lisbon—wars, revolutions, bargains in umbrellas, exhibitions of water-colors. This consumed three-quarters of the journey. After that he watched the procession of houses, walls, trees, reeling past in the mellow slant light, and began already to feel his garden about him. He observed the flight of the train unconsciously, and it was almost automatically, at the unrealized sight of a certain group of trees, oddly leaning away from each other, like a group of ballet dancers expressing an extravagance of horror, that he rose and approached the door.

The sense of escape was instant. Sky and earth

generously took him, the train fled shrieking into the vague bright infinity of afternoon. The last faint wail of it, as it plunged into a tunnel, always seemed to him to curl about his head like a white tentacle, too weak to be taken seriously. Then, in the abrupt silence, he began climbing the long hill that led to his house. He walked swiftly, blowing tattered blue clouds of smoke over his shoulders, revolving in his mind the items of news amusing enough to be reported to Hilda; such as that Miss Green, the stenographer, who had for some time been manifesting a disposition to flirt with him, today, just after closing, when everybody else had gone out, had come to him, blushing, and asked him to fasten the sleeve of her dress. A delicious scene! He smiled about the stem of his pipe, but exchanged his smile for a laugh when, looking in through a gap in his neighbor's hedge, he found himself staring into the depraved eyes of a goat. This would add itself to the episode of Miss Green, for these eyes were precisely hers. He turned the corner and saw his house before him, riding on the hill like a small ship on a long green wave. The three children were playing a wild game of croquet, shrieking. Louder sounds arose at his appearance, and as he strode across the lawn they danced about him chattering and quarreling.

"Daddy, Martha won't play in her turn, and I say—"

"Marjorie takes the heavy mallet—"

The chorus rose shrill about him, but he laughed and went into the house, shouting only:

"Out of the way! I'm in a hurry! The beans are dying, the tomatoes are clamoring for me, the peas are holding out their hands!"

"Daddy says the beans are dying. Isn't he silly!"

"Let's get to the garden before daddy does."

As he closed the door he heard the shrieks trailing off round the corner of the house, diminuendo. He hung up coat and hat with a rapid gesture and hurried to the kitchen. Hilda, stirring the cocoa with a long spoon, looked round at him laconically.

"Chocolate!" he shouted, and pulled a cake of chocolate out of his pocket. He was astonished, he rolled his eyes, for it appeared to have been sat upon—"in the train." Hilda shrieked with laughter. He thrust it into her apron pocket and fled up the stairs to change.

He could not find his old flannel trousers. Not in the cupboard—not in the bureau. He surrendered to an impulse to comic rage. "Not under the bed!" he cried. He thrust his head out of the window that overlooked the garden and addressed his children.

"Martha! bring my trousers here this instant!"

He drew in his head again from the shower of replies that flew up at him like missiles and going to the door roared down to his wife.

"I've lost my trousers!"

Then he found them in the closet behind the door, and, laughing, put them on.

## II.

He ran out of the side door, under the wistaria-covered trellis, and down the slippery stone steps to the vegetable garden.

"Here comes daddy, now," shrilled to him from Martha.

He lighted his pipe, shutting his left eye, and stood in profound meditation before the orderly, dignified, and extraordinarily vigorous rows of beans. They were in blossom—bees were tumbling the delicate lilac-pink little hoods. Clouds of fragrance came up from them. The crickets were beginning to tune up for the evening. The sun was poised above the black water tower on the far hill.

Martha and Marjorie began giggling mysteriously behind the lilacs.

"My hoe!" he wailed.

The hoe was thrust out from behind the lilacs.

"If anybody should drive up in a scarlet taxi," he said to Martha, accepting the hoe, "and inform you that your soul is free, don't believe him. Tell him he's a liar. Point me out to him as a symbol of the abject slavery that all life is. Say that I'm a miserable thrall to wife, children, and beans—particularly beans. I spend my days on my knees before my beans."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," said Martha.

He held his hoe under his arm and walked solemnly among the beans. The two girls followed him.

"Here's a caterpillar, daddy!"

"Kill him!"

"Here's another—a funny green one with red sparkles on his back. Oh, look at him!"

"Don't look at him! Kill him."

"He squirts out like green tooth-paste."

"Don't, Martha!" he cried, pained. "Don't say such things! Spare your neurotic father."

He shrank visibly and strode off to the corner where his peas were planted and started methodically hoeing the rows, turning the rich loam up about the pale stalks. Now and again a pebble clinked, he stooped and threw it off into the meadow. Mary, the youngest, came to the top of the steps and cried. Martha and Marjorie went to her, and he forgot them. The rising and falling of the hoe-blade, shiny with much polishing in the brown soil, hypnotized him, and his thoughts fell into a sort of rhythm, came and went without his interference. "Ridiculous!" he thought, "that this solemn singular biped, whom other bipeds for convenience call Andrew, should stand here with a stick and scratch the skin of this aged planet. What does he expect to get for it? It pleases the aged planet. She stretches herself in the twilight, purrs like an old cat, and expresses her pleasure in the odd and useful effluvium we call peas. And this biped wears clothes. Think of it! He wears clothes; things made out of plant-fiber and sheep's wool cunningly and hideously made to fit his arms and legs. He has in his pocket—a small pouch made in these singular garments—a watch, a

small, shiny round object in which he has reduced to feeble but regular iambs the majestic motions of the sun, earth, and stars. He takes it out and looks at it with an air of comprehension and puts it back again. Why doesn't he laugh at himself?" . . . He chuckled. . . . "This object tells him that he has time for two more rows before dinner. Clink, clink. Damn these pebbles. My antediluvian anthropoid ape of an ancestor had to walk round them, they were so huge. He sat on them, cracked nuts against them, chattered with his family. He had no watch, and his trousers grew like grass. . . . Thank the lord they've become pebbles."

He sighed, and for a moment rested his chin on the hoe-handle, peering out towards the tree-encircled swamp. The hylas were beginning to jingle their elfin bells. A red-winged blackbird sailed in the last sunlight from one apple-tree to another.

"All a vicious circle—and all fascinating. Utterly preposterous and futile, but fascinating."

He dropped the hoe and trundled the wheelbarrow to the edge of the strawberry-bed.

"Why can't you stay where you're put?" he said. "Why do you grow all over the place like this?"

With a trowel he began digging up the runners and placing them on the wheelbarrow. It delighted him to part the soft cool soil with his fingers, to thrust them sensitively among the finely filamented roots. The delicate snap, subterranean, of rootlets gave him a delicious pang. "Blood flows—but it's all for the

best; in the best of all possible worlds. Yield to me, strawberries, and you shall bear. I am the resurrection and the life." When he had a sufficient pile of plants, he trundled the wheelbarrow to the new bed, exquisitely prepared, rich, warm, inviting. With the hoe he made a series of holes, and then, stooping, thrust the hairy roots back into the earth, pressing the soil tenderly about them. Then he rose, stretched his back, and lighted his pipe, shutting his left eye, and enshrining the flame, which danced, in the hollow of his stained hands. The cloud of smoke went up like incense.

"Water!" he cried. "Water! Water!"

Martha appeared, after a moment, bringing the watering-pot. She held it in front of her with both hands.

"Quick, Martha, before they die. Their tongues are turning black."

"Silly!" Martha replied.

The earth about each plant was darkened with the tilted water, and the soiled leaves and stems were brightened.

"Listen, daddy! they're smacking their lips."

"They are pale, they have their eyes shut, they are reaching desperately down into the darkness for something to hold on to. They grope and tickle at atoms of soil, they shrink away from pebbles, they sigh and relax."

"When the dew falls, they'll sing."

"Ha, ha! what fools we are."



He flung the hoe across the wheelbarrow and started wheeling it towards the toolhouse.

"Bring the watering-pot!"

Martha ran after him and put it in the wheelbarrow.

"That's right—add to my burden—never do anything that you can make somebody else do."

Martha giggled, in response, and skipped towards the house. When she reached the stone steps she put her feet close together and with dark seriousness hopped up step after step in that manner. He watched her and smiled.

"O Lord, Lord," he said, "what a circus we are."

He trundled the bumping wheelbarrow and whistled. The red sun, enormous in the slight haze, was gashing itself cruelly on a black pine tree. The hylas, by now, had burst into full shrill-sweet chorus in the swamp, and of the birds all but a few scraping grackles were still. "Peace—peace—peace," sang the hylas, a thousand at once. Silver bells, frailer than thimbles, ringing under a still and infinite sea of ether. . . . "Peace—peace," he murmured. Then he dropped the wheelbarrow in horror, and put his hands to his ears. "The enemy!" he cried. "Martha! hurry! Martha!" This time Martha seemed to be out of earshot, so he was obliged to circumvent the enemy with great caution. The enemy was a toad who sat, by preference, near the toolhouse door: obese, sage, and wrinkled like a Chinese god. "Toad that under cold stone." Marvellous compulsion of rhythm. . . . He thrust the

wheelbarrow into the cool pleasant-smelling darkness of the toolhouse, and walked towards the kitchen door, which just at that moment Hilda opened.

"Hurry up," she said. Her voice had a delicious mildness in the still air and added curiously to his already overwhelming sense of luxury. He had, for a moment, an extraordinarily satisfying sense of space.

### III.

He lifted his eyes from the pudding to the Hokusai print over the mantel.

"Think of it with shame! We sit here again grossly feeding our insatiable bellies, while Fujiyama, there, thrusts his copper-colored cone into a cobalt sky among whipped-cream clouds! Pilgrims, in the dusk, toil up his sides with staves. Pilgrims like ants. They struggle upwards in the darkness for pure love of beauty."

"I don't like bread-pudding," ejaculated Mary solemnly, "it's beany."

Martha and Marjorie joined in a silvery cascade of giggles.

"Where *did* she get that awful word!" said Hilda.

"Tom says it, mother."

"Well for goodness's sake forget it."

Mary stared gravely about the table, spoon in mouth, and then, removing the spoon, repeated "It's beany."

He groaned, folding his napkin.

"What an awful affliction a family is. Why did we marry, Hilda? Life is a trap."

"Mrs. Ferguson called this afternoon and presented

me with a basket of green strawberries. I'm afraid she thought I wasn't very appreciative. I hate to be interrupted when I'm sewing. Why under the sun does she pick them before they're ripe?"

"That's a nice way to treat a neighbor who gives you a present! . . . You *are* an ungrateful creature."

Hilda was languid.

"Well, I didn't ask her for them."

Her eyes gleamed with a slow provocative amusement.

"They're beany," said Mary.

He rolled his eyes at Mary.

"Our kids are too much with us. Bib and spoon, Feeding and spanking, we lay waste our powers!"

They all pushed back their chairs, laughing, and a moment later as he lighted his cigar he heard from the music-room, Hilda's violin begin with tremulous thin notes, oddly analogous to the sound of her voice when she sang, playing Bach to a methodical loud piano accompaniment by Martha. Melancholy came like a blue wave out of the dusk, lifted him, and broke slowly and deliciously over him. He stood for a moment, made motionless by the exquisite, intricate melody, stared, as if seeking with his eyes for the meaning of the silvery algebra of sound, and then went out.

The sun had set, darkness was at hand. He walked to the top of the stone steps and looked across the shallow valley towards the fading hill and the black water-tower. The trees on the crest, sharply silhouetted

against a last band of pale light, looked like marching men. Lights winked at the base of the hill. And now, as hill and water-tower and trees became obscure, he began to see once more the dim phantasmal outlines of the dark city, the city submerged under the infinite sea, the city not inhabited by mortals. Immense, sinister, and black, old and cold as the moon, were the walls that surrounded it. No gate gave entrance to it. Of a paler stone were the houses upon houses, tiers upon tiers of shadowy towers, which surmounted the walls. Not a light was to be seen in it, not a motion: it was still. He stared and stared at it, following with strained eyes the faint lines which might indicate its unlighted streets, seeking in vain, as always, to discover in the walls of it any sign of any window. It grew darker, it faded, a profound and vast secret, an inscrutable mystery.

"She is older than the rocks," he murmured.

He turned away and walked over the lawn in the darkness, listening to the hylas, who seemed now to be saturating the hushed night with sound. "Peace—peace—peace—" they sang. *Pax vobiscum*. He gathered the croquet mallets and leaned them against the elm tree, swearing when he tripped over an unseen wicket. This done, he walked down the pale road, blowing clouds of smoke above him with uplifted face, and luxuriated in the sight of the dark tops of trees motionless against the stars. A soft skipping sound in the leaves at the road's edge made him jump. He laughed to himself. . . . "He had no watch, and his

trousers grew like grass. . . ." He took out his watch and peered closely at it. The children were in bed, and Hilda was waiting for a game of chess. He walked back with his hands deep in his pockets. Pawn to King-four.

"Hilda! wake up!"

Hilda opened her candid eyes without astonishment and sat up over the chess-board, on which the tiny men were already arranged.

"Goodness! how you scared me. What took you so long? I've been dreaming about Bluebeard."

"Bluebeard! Good heavens. I hope he didn't look like me."

"He did—remarkably!"

"A *nice* thing to say to your husband. . . . Move! Hurry up! . . . I'm going to capture your King. Queens die young and fair."

He smoked his pipe. Hilda played morosely. Delicious she was when she was half asleep like this! She leaned her head on one hand, her elbow on the table. . . . When she had been checkmated, at the end of half an hour, she sank back wearily in her chair. She looked at him intently for a moment and began to smile.

"And how about the dark city tonight?" she asked. He took slow puffs at his pipe and stared meditatively at the ceiling.

"Ah—the dark city, Hilda! the city submerged under an infinite sea, the city not inhabited by mortals! . . . It was there again—would you believe it? . . . It was

there. . . . I went out to the stone steps, smoking my cigar, while you played Bach. I hardly dared to look—I watched the hill out of the corner of my eyes, and pretended to be listening to the music. . . . And suddenly, at the right moment of dusk, just after the street-lamps had winked along the base of the hill, I saw it. The hill that we see there in the daylight with its water-tower and marching trees, its green sloping fields and brook that flashes in the sun, is unreal, an illusion, the thinnest of disguises—a cloak of green velvet which the dark city throws over itself at the coming of the first ray of light. . . . I saw it distinctly. Immense, smooth, and black, old and cold as the moon, are the walls that surround it. No gate gives entrance to it. Of a paler stone are the houses, tiers upon tiers of shadowy towers that surmount those sepulchral walls. No motion was perceptible there—no light gleamed there—no sound, no whisper rose from it. I thought: perhaps it is a city of the dead. The walls of it have no windows, and its inhabitants must be blind. . . . And then I seemed to see it more closely, in a twilight which appeared to be its own, and this closer perception gave way, in turn, to a vision. For first I saw that all the walls of it are moist, dripping, slippery, as if it were bathed in a deathlike dew; and then I saw its people. Its people are maggots—maggots of perhaps the size of human children; their heads are small and wedge-shaped, and glow with a faint bluish light. Masses of them swarm within those walls. Masses of them pour through

the streets, glisten on the buttresses and parapets. They are intelligent. What horrible feast is it that nightly they celebrate there in silence? On what carrion do they feed? It is the universe that they devour; and they build above it, as they devour it, their dark city like a hollow tomb. . . . Extraordinary that this city, which seen from here at dusk has so supernatural a beauty, should hide at the core so vile a secret. . . ."

Hilda stared at him.

"Really, Andrew, I think you're going mad."

"Going? I'm gone! My brain is maggoty."

They laughed, and rattled the chessmen into their wooden box. Then they began locking the doors and windows for the night.



## THE ORANGE MOTH

### I.

A HOT, sticky August evening. Almost six o'clock. The freckled young man, whose name was Cooke, had his watch before him on the table where he was writing. His sleeves were rolled up, showing thin freckled arms with sparse blonde hairs, and he had taken off his collar, which lay on the top of the book-case. He looked down through the tall open window into Twenty-third Street and saw, across the way, the latticed saloon door perpetually swinging. A man in his shirt-sleeves, carrying his pale alpaca coat over his left arm, fanned his red face with a panama. He said something to the woman, then disappeared through the swinging door. A girl came out carrying a tin pail brimful of beer—"rushing the growler." A dingy terrier briskly trotted round the corner, trotting obliquely, carrying its hindquarters well to starboard. He peered under the swinging door, with one paw lifted, and the cat, crouched on the brown steps next door, began to arch her back. Then a green and white street car, crowded, cut off his vision, and Cooke again regarded, somewhat wearily, his manuscript. He was using yellow paper—he had bought a thick block of it in a Ninth Avenue shop, hoping that yellow would make

him more prolific. But it didn't seem particularly to help him. At the top of the page "Beauty" was written, and twice underscored. Below it was one long paragraph, disordered with cancellations and interpolations. He completed the sentence: "but to stare at Beauty, to attempt to track it down, to set snares for it, to turn a powerful glare of consciousness upon it, is almost inevitably to frighten it away. Beauty is the chimæra which exists only in imagination. It is the mirage, born of drought, which, the more it is approached, the more it dissolves. It is the gold and purple Phoenix which is reborn only out of ashes." . . . No, this wouldn't do at all. He crossed it all out, peevishly. This, as he had only just finished learning at college, was a mere purple passage. He wanted something purple, certainly, but not this frayed and moth-y purple as of the stage-ropes of the player King. Something like "the eastern conduits ran with wine": that was what he wanted. He opened De Quincey again—it had been helping him, or discouraging him, all afternoon—and read a page, opened to at random; while he read he kept pulling at his shirt, which was soaked through with perspiration, to detach it from his body. Damned discouraging—he would never capture the secret of that style. . . . Perhaps it would be better if he tried red ink, like Flodden, who had the next room, and whom he could hear moving on his bed. . . . Or should he go back to blank-books? . . . He opened his latest blank-book, where an uncompleted poem ended with the lines—

Like Erisichton, by a sad mischance,  
Gnawest thou at thine own enfeebled limbs?

Well, by God, that was pretty good! He would go on with it: the glamor of life was renewed in him by something connected with those lines: twilight, soft music, women's faces white under arc-lamps. He felt melancholy. After all, it was wonderful, living in a dirty boarding house in the great city. He thought of the girl he had seen at Childs' in Madison Square the day before: she wore a lavender-colored soft dress and a wide straw hat. After lunch he had followed her irresolutely as far as Brentano's. Then he had gone into Brentano's—to read all the foreign magazines. He looked everywhere for clues to beauty, to some short cut by which he could learn to write as he wanted to—with power and subtlety and magnificence. But what he wrote was always commonplace.

The six o'clock whistles began to blow. The tom-tom downstairs in the basement, where the dark dining-room was, began its soft swelling clamor, ending in a brazen crash. He heard Billington, in the room over his head, push back his chair which screeched on the bare floor, and take several soft steps. Flodden's bed began creaking agitatedly. The iron gate in the front yard clanged, and looking down he saw Mr. Ezra D. Ramsden, the detective (sour-faced idiot), walking up the path. He was carrying a paper package under his arm, and looking at the red headlines of a newspaper: the creaking of his shoes was audible and the basement

door rang automatically as he went in. . . . Two fingernails ticked the door, and Flodden entered, his white Hapsburg face grinning, his bad teeth showing, and black gums.

"Alas," he cried, "what boots it with incessant care: to strictly meditate the thankless muse? . . . Were it not better done, as others booze, to sport with Phyllis at the Palisades?"

"The Palisades tonight? Too damned hot."

"Out in the vestry, too damned hot," sang Flodden. He shuffled to the window in his red carpet slippers, and spat neatly to the path below. "It's too hot for anything but cold baths and naps. That's what I've been doing all afternoon, one after another. When I wasn't in the bath, Mother Ramsden was; when Mrs. Ramsden wasn't, I was; and vice versa and et cetera ad infinitum. And when I wasn't either soaking or sleeping, I read 'The Lake,' as being the coolest book I could think of. . . . Certainly the coolest of Moore's! Ha, ha."

"Papa Ramsden is back from the Wild West with his disguise under his arm."

"More likely it's a touching little gift for the missus. Sister Susie, being in hopes, read the works of Marie Stopes. Now she's in a sad condition because she read the wrong edition."

"How delightful! Where do you pick up these engaging trifles, Flod!"

"Solicit not thy thought with matters hid: leave them to Flod. I wonder if the mail's come! I'm ex-

pecting a check for a thousand dollars from the *Smart Set*. If it's come I'll treat you to a dinner at the free lunch over the way."

"What have you sold to the *Smart Set*?"

"The usual cynical little triangle story. I turn them out by recipe. Take one sweet, tired, gingham wife in a Long Island village: one successful climbing husband, who wants to build him more stately mansions, O my soul, but finds his wife still feeding the chickens—come, chick come, chick!—add one deep-eyed chorus girl recuperating in the country from housemaid's knee. Stir till thick. Separate them. Sprinkle with Belasco sauce. And there you are. . . . I cut all the descriptive passages out of the newspapers. Much easier than trying to grasp the contemporary style myself."

He knocked out his pipe on the windowsill, humming. While Cooke was fastening his collar, Billington came in.

"I say, where are we going to hog it, tonight? . . . Shall we go to that new Chinese place in Sixth Avenue? . . . No, let's go to Keen's. . . . No, Schwartz's would be better—pigs' knuckles and cold beer. No, I feel like something *really subtle*. What about Leveroni's and a lobster? . . ."

He beamed, leaning on a massive walking-stick almost as long as himself: pirouetted round it, excited.

"One at a time, Steel-trap!"

"I don't feel like eating at all," said Cooke jerking his striped tie.

"Cookie's romantic," laughed Flodden. "Waitah! Waitah! Bring me, please, the underdone uvula of a bat—and waitah, one moment please—I'll have just a half-portion, please, just a half-portion."

"Dry up, Flod! You make me sick."

"Well, if we are going out in serious quest of food, I'll have to take off my beautiful slippers."

"Go barefoot, Flod," said Billington, his black eyes glittering. "Wrap a sheet around you and carry a lily."

"Tush," said Flodden, and disappeared into the hall.

## II.

On the way downtown, Cooke said little to his two companions, feeling that they irritated him. They were older than he. They were fairly successful hack-writers, knew the ropes, talked esoterically of the editors they knew. Certainly, they fascinated him. He liked living with them, liked the perpetual casual contact with them. But why the devil did they chatter so incessantly? How could they keep up, as they did, their clever patter? There seemed to be nothing serious in them—they were always laughing and smirking. Cooke, from the window of the elevated train, stared out, peered into all the house windows. All those lives, in there! Secret, rich, mysterious. He liked to see the people moving there, inside, folding newspapers, taking pots from stoves, turning back bed covers, reaching up arms to light the gas. He liked the heavy Jewesses leaning out into the evening, apa-



thetic, their massive breasts spread out on the cool stone, their faces like the faces of oxen. The street swarmed with children; children ragged and noisy. The vast multiplicity thrilled him and made him melancholy. There it was, so close to him, so immediate, yet he could do nothing with it! Some poison in his brain turned it all to dullness, to mud—no, worse than that, to a kind of lifeless simulacrum, a mechanical formula—as soon as he tried to touch it. Why was it? Oh, God, if he could only get hold of beauty! It was so simple a thing—this tawny evening light flung slantwise from the west through dirty streets—streets of wholesale warehouses strewn with broken crates and straw—ash cans and blown papers.

"Ah, Paree!" Flodden exclaimed, as he stepped off the iron stairs and tapped the sidewalk with his malacca stick. Billington was laughing.

"No, seriously, Flod! How did you do it? You aren't beautiful, you know."

"Cookie, he says I'm not beautiful. . . . A thing of duty is a boy forever. That's the secret of my success."

Billington took Cooke's arm.

"He won't tell me how he got his gallery of mistresses in Paris. You know, those photos in his room. *Votre Petite Amie*, Dolorine. To my dear little cabbage, with all my heart, from Goo Goo. And so forth."

"Never-never!" cried Flodden. "Betray the little darlings? *Grossly* indelicate."

They all laughed.



"All the same, Flod, I believe you bought the whole collection, of pictures, I mean, for a franc."

"Half a franc. There was nothing indecent in them, so they went cheap."

In the dark French restaurant, with its bare polished tables, winy smell, and rows and rows of bottles and great casks, bottles tiered all the way to the ceiling, Flodden chuckled.

"My dear Bill, my poor Bill, I understand you perfectly and sympathize with you deeply. Yes, you lack that something, that *Je ne sais quoi*, which brings the bird to your hand. If you really want to know how I did it, it was like this. When I wanted a mistress, I went into the *Magazin du Louvre*, or the House of a Thousand Shirts, pretending to seek a hat for Madame—Madame Flodden. The hat girls are usually very pretty. Flirtation. Discreet innuendoes. Flattery. And there"—he snapped his fingers—"it was."

Anchovies—crabmeat salad—*amer picon*—how romantic! thought Cooke. He was excited by the conversation between Billington and Flodden, but was ashamed to ask questions. He would have liked to know everything about it—everything. How unbearably hot it was in here. Electric fans whirled their colored ribbons of paper. Did Flod really do that? The photos on Flod's bureau had agitated him—soiled and scented trophies of six months in Paris. Flod was lucky. Once or twice he had talked seriously about Dolorine, who had lived with him on Montmartre. They had been on a picnic together to some place near

Paris where there were houses in trees. They sat in a sidewalk café drinking beer under a chestnut tree which was in bloom. Dolorine had a sad sensual face, was pale, had a habit of putting her elbows on the table and resting her chin on her hands. "Monsieur," she said, "monsieur, monsieur." How astonishing to climb the dark tenement stairs at night with Dolorine, a French girl. Dolorine struck a match, lit the gas, and squealed. "Ah! those devils! they have forgotten my milk. Oh, Toto! Your poor coffee! You will have no coffee." She squealed again, when Toto—Flod—kissed her, tipping her hat to one side and getting a feather in his eye. The bed was by the window.

Billington was talking excitedly, as he always did, his eyes sparkling, and darting about, never resting anywhere for long. "It's perfectly true—I do lack something, I do. I don't know what it is—I don't really! I'm shy, but just the same women stimulate me simply extraordinarily, and I can talk to them—oh, infinitely better than I can with men. And yet I don't make the slightest impression on them! Not the slightest. Now this afternoon I went to see Celia Daggett—you know, the miniature painter. She lives on Sixty-second Street. She attracts me very much, and I should like immensely to make her fall in love with me—in which case I'd fall in love with her. Well, this afternoon she had a terrific effect on me—absolutely terrific. She has a quick mind—she has a kind of tired prettiness, if you know what I mean. And really, she intoxicated me. I never talked so bril-

liantly before in my life. I talked like a genius—like a genius! I showered epigrams—I was a chandelier-tree, showering crystal. I was *conscious* of my power—I used it up to the last notch—I was like a magician, making strange and beautiful things come out of words. I was so excited that I couldn't sit still. I stood in the middle of the floor and talked to her. Really, I'm not exaggerating at all—I'm quite detached about it. And Celia was amazed—and that was the end of it. Now how do you explain it? It's most tiresome."

"Wasting your sweetness on the desert hair," said Cooke, "I think it's a mistake—you probably frightened her. I think what women like best is to have you confide in them."

Flodden slapped the table.

"Oh, Cookie, you're so nice and young! Ha, ha! What do you confide in them, Cookie? Come now, tell us. Can't you just *hear* him, Bill, confiding in a sort of throaty hesitating voice, you know, with his dear face turned a little away, sadly—'Nellie, if you only knew how unhappy I am!—but there! I mustn't bore you by talking about myself!'"

"The foul fiend fly away with you," growled Cooke, blushing, "and pick your pox-bit bones."

Flodden's remark hurt him and made him angry; he was silent; but he reflected that it was for just this sort of remark that he most cherished Flodden. His utter recklessness of other peoples' feelings, and, so often, the sharpness of his perceptions! Just the sort of sharpness he himself lacked. Arrows dipped in

dragon's blood. It was curious, just the same, that Flodden didn't write any better—all his ability was on the surface. Dull, facetious little pot-boilers. The humor of the comic strips. He sipped his *amer picon*.

"You haven't had your bat's uvula," said Flodden. "Waitah!" he cried, but not too loud. Then a thought struck him. "By George! I forgot to tell you, Cookie, you have an admirer—a great man admires you. Not a woman, I regret to say—no stage queen. But old man Butler, the portrait painter. I was talking with him at the Petit Pas the other night. 'Who was the boy,' he said, 'in Bill's room the other day—with the honest blue eyes? A lovely face! And of an innocence inconceivable.' He wants to meet you again—he wants you to sit for him. . . . Look at him blush! By God, he *is* innocent."

When they had finished their dinner they strolled down to the Battery. Flodden, swinging his stick, walked ahead, singing, as if he had forgotten them. At the water's edge they sat, dangling their feet. They took their coats off, sat in silence, watching the Staten Island ferries. Lights rippled on the water, and a faint east wind cooled their faces.

### III.

Cooke liked to feel the strong draught blowing through the subway express, with its rubbery underground smell. A gale in a cellar. Escaped newspapers floated like ghosts from car to car, crashed against doors, wrapped themselves round peoples' legs, flapped,

wheeled, spread themselves out flat. Bill was talking about some poet he knew and his prowess as a swimmer. Flagrant plagiarism from Byron and Swinburne. "Powerful! I never saw anything like it. He beats the waves with tremendous, imperious arms. Yodels in the water, wallows there like a monster, like a leviathan! By God, it's wonderful to watch him. We went to Midland Beach. He absolutely *subjugates* the sea. . . . And when he comes out, hairy and immense, he runs up the sand, dances, sings, stamps, exults like a god!"

Flodden laughed.

"All the same, his poetry is rotten. Just what you'd expect, too—he wallows like a monster in a sea of spurious ecstasy—yodels a froth of evaporated cream."

Twenty-third Street, dark, was still far from quiet. A long freight train clanked slowly, red-lighted, along Death Avenue. A street car, nearly empty, brilliantly lighted, rattled under the elevated. In the arc-lighted yard, under the mangy ailanthus tree, the detective and his wife sat, silent, watching the cat sharpen its claws against the smooth bark. "Hot night," said Ezra D. Ramsden.

In the stifling room, Cooke dipped his pen and held it over the yellow page. Out of all this, out of all this, wasn't it possible to catch a single thing? He took a new blank-book from the shelf and opened the fair unspotted page. Perhaps that would be better. But it was no use—all he could think of was Flodden's saying "of an innocence inconceivable," and "honest

blue eyes." De Quincey didn't help him—neither did Pater. He was a failure. He'd give it up—he'd get a job. After meditating for a long while he undressed and went to bed, drawing over himself a single sheet. He heard the Ramsdens murmuring in the yard. "Well, I tell you, things like vegetables are cheaper there, but that's all." Presently he slept. He dreamed that an orange-colored moth flew heavily in through the window, and settled with wide velvet wings on the opened page of the blank-book. The orange wings covered the two pages completely. He sprang up, shut the book, and the beautiful thing was caught. When he opened the book, he found that the pages were soft orange moth wings; and incredibly fine, indecipherable, in purple, a poem of extraordinary beauty was written there.

## THE LAST VISIT

### I.

MARIE SCHLEY sat in the Watertown car by the open grilled window. It was a sunny afternoon, the first Saturday in October. Clouds of dust swooped over Mount Auburn Street, flew into the car, made the passengers cough. On the Charles River, an eight-oared crew was rowing round the blue turn, crawling like a centipede; the voice of the coxswain could be heard, the blades flashed irregularly. A subdued many-throated clamor came raggedly across the flat fields from the Stadium, suddenly rose intense, on a higher note, then died slowly. A football game must be going on there. Yes—there were the usual kites flying, flashing high over the Stadium. How familiar it all was! It made her feel slightly sad, and yet, also, she could not conceal from herself that she was much freer to enjoy its beauty, to enjoy it merely as a spectacle, than had ever been possible for her in the past. . . . It was familiar; but now that she lived so far away and came so seldom, it was also remote. It had now an “atmosphere”—she said almost aloud—an atmosphere. It was no longer so dreadfully a part of her own being. It was true there had been a time—the first year that she was in Boston, when she was twelve—a time when



“going to Watertown to see Grandmother” was a positive delight. Even that, however, hadn’t been so much a fondness for Grandmother as a delight in the queer musty old furniture, the antimacassars, the tussocks, the rosy conch-shells on the gray carpet—of an extraordinary size, and used as door fenders—and above all, Grandmother’s passion for good food. The cherries, for which Marie with a pail used to climb the tree, the “plain apple pie,” the coffee cake so richly crusted with spiced sugar (Grandmother always called it “kooken”)—certainly these had been very important items. Even then she had been on her guard, reserved, with Grandmother—there had never been any question of an intimacy between them. Grandmother had always been hard and childlike, all her life had had that peculiar inaptitude for intimacy and sympathy which accompanies the child’s lack of “consciousness.” Visiting her during the school holidays, later, Marie had gradually, as she grew older, seen this hardness clearly enough. Grandmother’s hardness—oh, it was really almost a meanness—had called forth, or implanted, a meanness in herself. It had often seemed to her that Grandmother was cruel. How much these cruelties—which were wholly of a psychological sort—had been deliberate, or how much they had been simply the natural effect, unconscious, of a hard callous, defeated old woman on a young and shy and sensitive one, she had never known. Nor had she ever known, to tell the truth, whether if she herself had been less of an egoist, she might not have discovered more sharply, in her

Grandmother, the shy and affectionate girl, with remarkably nice blue eyes, who occasionally laughed there and then took flight. Later still, when she was going to college, she had in a measure "escaped" the antipathy, had been able to challenge it laughingly, and had worked a decided and delightful change in her relations with the old woman. Grandmother's "meanness," she had found, could often be undermined by laughter: her sense of humor, or at any rate, of the ridiculous, was delicious. She was the only woman Marie knew who often, and literally "laughed till she cried." Marie, ever since her college days, had used this discovery skilfully—she had been "free" to make the discovery and to use it, in some unaccountable way, just after her return from a trip to Europe. Was it simply that then at last she had forced Grandmother to accept her as "grown-up" and an equal? At all events it had led to a kindness between them. Yes, they had had a few pleasant days together. If they had formerly hated one another, quarreled savagely,—ah, those frightful quarrels over nothing!—quarrels had passed. Grandmother had, growing older, grown gentler; she herself, feeling herself to be superior, had learned to tolerate the flashes of cruelty and meanness. And now it was all to be ended—Watertown was to be rolled away—the dusty ride along Mount Auburn Street was to become less familiar, forgotten—Grandmother was going to die. A month—two months—five—

Watertown was changing extraordinarily. Her

sense of its sharp difference, its newness, was a kind of reproach; for it seemed to hint that Grandmother had been neglected. If she had come oftener—seen the new houses being built, new cellars being dug, new streets being surveyed—she would not, she felt sure, be now so struck by its complete alteration. How horribly suburban it was, with all its rows of cheap two-family houses! Loathsome—shoddy little stucco garages, forlorn little barberry hedges, rows of one-storied little shops, built of garish brick—all this evidence of pullulating vulgarity where, in her childhood, had been green fields, hill pastures with tumbled stone walls, wild cherries, and, in autumn, thickets starred with the candid blue stars of chicory. She remembered a walk with Uncle Tom from Harvard Square to Grandmother's, when she was twelve. What an adventure in the wilderness! The hills between Belmont and Watertown were covered with juniper and birch trees. Skirting Palfrey Hill, they had come into Watertown past the old graveyard. It had seemed like coming down from a morning's walk on the Himalayas. And what were all these changes for? . . . What did it lead to? . . . It seemed as if men were determined to trample and vulgarize every inch of the world. She remembered that seventeenth—or was it eighteenth century song in an old song book—"By the waters of Watertown we sat down and wept, yea, we wept when we remembered Boston." . . . Poor Grandmother! It was as well, perhaps, that she had so long been a prisoner to her stuffy little antimacassared room, with

its albums of daguerreotypes—she would have hated this change. Ah, but would she—would she! It was not so certain. Grandmother was a born provincial, a village democrat—perhaps she would have liked this show of energy, in which there was no pretense, and nowhere any distinction. It would perhaps have pleased her to see that Watertown, so palpably, was growing. . . . The churches would thrive. The markets would improve. . . .

Marie got off at Palfrey Street, and began climbing the hill. The mysterious brook, which used to flow under the street, full of old rusted pots and lidless tin cans, was gone. She climbed slowly—ah, not so rapidly as when she used to run up Palfrey Hill before breakfast to look for wild flowers! Silver-rod used to grow on Palfrey Hill—the only place she had ever seen it. That was before Grandmother had moved away from the house on Mount Auburn Street, with the cherry tree and the pear tree, and the “owners” (with whom Grandmother perpetually quarreled and bickered) living in the other half of the house, “playing the piano till all hours, and carrying on something awful.” Marie wondered what they had been like. Probably they were very nice cheerful people. One of the daughters was a Christian Science Healer: the son worked in a music store. To Marie there had always been something romantic about them, and she had never passed their door in the hall without wanting to knock and go in. Once, she *had* gone in; all that she remembered was a plaster bust of a god or goddess

who seemed, on top of the piano, to be meditating. There had also been a dog, which Grandmother detested and always shook her apron at. "Phoo! get out, you dirty beast!" she would cry, an expression of extraordinary hatred in her face. . . . Marie laughed, thinking of this. . . . She passed the weeping birch—its leaves were touched with yellow. . . . Slightly out of breath she climbed the wooden steps and rang the bell.

## II.

"Oh, it's you, Mrs. Schley! How do you do! You're quite a stranger! . . . I think Mrs. Vedder's asleep. But I'll go and see. I'm sure she'll be delighted to see you!"

Mrs. Ling was detestable; that she was fearfully overworked, managing this private hospital, and that she was herself slowly dying (having lost, in her last operation, "all her insides," as Grandmother put it) did not make her more likable. A sly white face, with sly black eyes; a meager soul. Marie, standing in the suburban little hall, looked at the pious engravings, the cheap rugs. Above the mantel, Christ was leaning down, much haloed, into the valley of the shadow of death, reaching an incredibly long arm to rescue a lost lamb: over the dark valley hung a dove with bright wings. A pot of ferns stood on a small high bamboo table near the piano: the piano was a florid affair of pale oak. Marie looked at the music—the "Holy City," "Alexander's Ragtime Band," "Cuddle up a

Little Closer," "The Rosary." Here, at any rate, the piano would not be played till all hours!

"No—your Grandmother's awake. Will you go up?"

"How is Grandmother?"

"Well—about the same. She's very plucky!"

In the sick-room, with its gloom of lowered blinds, Marie at first found it difficult to see. The nurse hovered by the front window, smiling. Grandmother, in the great bed, turned the small shrunken face on the pillow, turned the pathetic blue eyes of a child. The forlorn little braid of streaked hair! Marie stooped and kissed the sunken weak mouth.

"Hello Grandmother!" she shouted, remembering that the old woman was deaf. "Are you glad to see me?"

Grandmother looked up in a bewildered, slightly frightened way, as if, oddly, she were peering up out of a depth.

"What did you say?" The voice was slow and faint.

"I said, are you glad to see me?"

"Oh yes, always glad to see you. I'm always glad to see you."

"How are you feeling?"

Grandmother very slowly and gently focussed her blue eyes—her pupils were very wide—on Marie's face. She seemed to be trying to see. She moved her lips, and then said weakly:

"Very bad. I can't eat."

"You can't eat? Why's that?"



Marie drew the chair closer to the bedside, determined to be cheerful. Mrs. Vedder fumbled with her thin trembling hand at the patchwork quilt, fumbled aimlessly, her eyes resting exploringly on Marie's face. It was as if she were struggling for speech, with a profound dark indifference.

"How's little Kate?" she quavered.

"Oh, Kate's fine! She gets all over the house, now, holding on to chairs and things. . . . When we take her to the beach in her little bathing-suit she crawls right into the water as if it were her native element. You never saw such courage and energy!"

"I wish I could see her. . . . She ought to be walking, oughtn't she?"

"Oh, no—she's not backward at all!"

"No—I suppose not. I wish I could see her. Is her hair the same color? Her hair was such a beautiful color—something like yours when you were little, only not so red. . . . I suppose you can't bring her up to town."

"No, it's not very easy, you see."

Marie, looking through the side window, by the bed, watched a gray squirrel running along the maple bough.

"It's my teeth—I can't use my teeth—that's why I talk so badly. The dentist was here last week. He said my jaw had shrunk, and this set of teeth wouldn't fit any more."

"Oh! What a shame, Granny! But can't you have them altered?"



"I can't afford it. . . . They charge me so much here. . . . It's wicked what they charge here!" . . .

Miss Thomas, the nurse, approached, holding a spoon and a medicine glass.

"Time for my little girl to take her medicine!" she said, dipping the teaspoon.

"What good does medicine do me?"

"Now you take it like a good girl—there! . . . That's right!"

Mrs. Vedder sank back exhausted, the blue-veined hands lying inert. After a moment her eyes filled with tears.

"Little Kate!" she wailed—"how I wish—" She began crying, weakly and uncontrollably. Miss Thomas wiped her cheeks for her, Marie drawing back.

"She cries a good deal," said Miss Thomas in a low voice. "She gets an idea, you know, and just thinks and thinks about it, and cries and cries. Especially little Kate! She's always wanting to see your little Kate. . . . Now, Grandmother! Stop crying! You don't want to spoil your granddaughter's visit, the first time she's been here in so long! Do you?"

"No! . . . I can't help it. . . ."

Marie began thinking of one Sunday in the Mount Auburn Street house, seventeen or eighteen years before. They were having an apple pie for dinner: a warm sunny day, she remembered the pear tree in blossom. "Your grandfather, whom you don't remember, always used to say, 'Well, there's nothing I like so much as *plain apple pie*.' How furious it made me!

He said it because he knew it infuriated me." Grandmother snorted, in a rage. "'Plain apple pie!' I said to him, 'there's nothing plain about it! What do you know about cooking? You think a plain apple pie can be just thrown together by anybody. I'd like to see how many women could make a pie like this!' . . . But," she added, "he went right on gabbling about plain apple pie, plain apple pie." Marie had laughed, and Grandmother, relenting, or shaking off the past, had suddenly laughed also. . . . On Sundays, Grandmother always played on the little parlor organ, the seven or eight hymn-tunes she knew, singing in a thin distressing voice. The organ had been sold when Grandmother was moved to the hospital. . . . Other things had been sold, too—Grandmother's possessions had become very few—three or four chairs, the horsehair sofa, a what-not, laden with family photographs, a framed lithochrome of the Rialto brought from Venice, a scroll-work clock made by her favorite son, who had died young. Presently these too would be sold.

"She's lost her memory, during this last month or so," said Miss Thomas, smoothing the fold of sheet over the quilt edge. "And her interest, too. But she's wonderfully brave. Then, shouting, '*Aren't* you, Grandmother!'"

Mrs. Vedder lay apathetic, her small withered face turned on one side, a hand under her cheek. Distance was in her eyes. She paid no attention, or had not heard. She looked at Marie and the nurse as if they had no meaning, or reality. What was she thinking,

Marie wondered. A cornflower blue, her eyes were, and still so extraordinarily young and innocent. There was a long silence, during which the squirrel in the maple tree began scolding—Marie, looking down through the screened window under the lowered curtain, saw a black cat cross the lawn, pretending to be indifferent. He sat down, put back first one ear, then the other, looked up into the tree, blinking affectionate green eyes, then trudged away, disillusioned and weary. . . . She ought to have brought something for Grandmother. But then, she had hardly had time. In the subway, it was true, at that little shop—but just then the Watertown car had come grinding round the turn; she would have had to wait fifteen minutes for another. Besides, Grandmother always had more flowers than she could use—and what, except hothouse grapes, could she eat? . . .

"I meant to bring you some grapes, Granny, but I didn't have time," she said. Mrs. Vedder seemed to go on listening after the remark was finished, as if she still had it somewhere and was giving it, slowly and with difficulty, all her attention.

"Mr. Sill gave me those roses," she brought out at last. She did not turn toward them (they stood on the desk) but simply assumed that Marie must have seen them. "He was here yesterday. . . ."

"What's he doing now that he's left the church?"

"What? . . . I don't know. . . . Teaching, I think. . . . How's Paul?" It always annoyed Marie when Grandmother inquired about her husband.

"Oh, he's all right."

"That's good." Grandmother sighed, and looked away at the viney wallpaper.

"I went to New York last week, Granny!"

"New York? Went to New York?"

"Yes—to see Alice. And a queer thing happened to me." There was no response in the blue eyes. "Do you hear me?"

"No."

"I say a queer thing happened to me in New York. . . . While I was staying with Alice I got a letter from Sarah Allbright—you remember Sarah Allbright? That little girl I used to play with in Chicago. I hadn't seen or heard from her since I was there—the last time I ever saw her was the day we played 'hookey' from school and ran off and got lost somewhere out by Winnetka. We got home about eleven o'clock at night. Well, in her letter she said she was in New York, for a visit, and wondered if I could come down from Fall River to see her! So I went to see her! Wasn't it exciting! She's huge—very fat. I think I'd have known her though. She's married to a lawyer, and has three children, and paints pictures. It *was* interesting to hear all about all the Chicago people I knew."

Grandmother stared, immobile.

"Who did you say looked after little Kate?" she quavered.

"Paul's mother." Marie felt herself flushing. Did Grandmother intend . . . ? But the old face was merely tired and expressionless.

"What was the queer thing that happened to you in New York?"

Marie's heart contracted. She moistened her lips and repeated the story, conscious of Miss Thomas's attention. But Grandmother, she saw, did not listen, after the first word or two, did not understand, merely rested the faded blue eyes on Marie's, as if it was not the story she was so darkly struggling to understand, but Marie herself. What was it she wanted so? What was it she was trying to see? Life? Her own life, embodied now in Marie and little Kate? Was she trying, dimly, to touch something which eluded her grasp, to feel something which she could not see? . . . She made no comment. But presently her eyes again, slowly, filled with tears, became intolerably bright, and suddenly she cried out, weeping:

"I can't die! I can't die! . . . I want to die and I can't!"

She cried almost soundlessly, the tears running down the wrinkles of her cheeks. Miss Thomas held up one finger, sternly.

"Grandmother, shame on you! You promised me not to cry. And now look at you—crying like this for nothing at all!"

"She's greatly changed," Marie murmured to the nurse. "It seems to me that she's seriously worse. Don't you think—"

Miss Thomas shook her head.

"Oh, no! She's very strong still. I don't see why she shouldn't live through the winter."

A little later, Marie, looking at her watch, said that she must run to catch her train. She would barely have time. She kissed the sunken mouth once more, patted the cool hand. Out of the brimmed eyes death looked up consciously and clearly, but Grandmother said only "Good-bye, Marie!"

## III.

Tom was walking up and down in the little alley that led to the theater, looking into shop windows. When he saw her, he came towards her, grinning in his one-sided freckled way. She felt that she had never liked him so much.

"On that corner—a rose, if you like," he said, without preliminaries, "or on this, a cup of coffee."

"Coffee! I've had an awful time."

"Awful? Was it? Why on earth do you go?"

"Partly because it gives me such a good alibi—everybody thinks I'm spending the whole afternoon in Watertown."

Tom smiled at her gratefully. They went into the lunch-room.

"But it's horrible, somehow," Marie went on, after a moment, stirring the cup of coffee which had been brought to the mahogany counter. "She's dying. Really dying. She said a most dreadful thing! . . . And I lied cheerfully about the train, and came gayly away to meet—you—of whom not one of my family or friends ever heard! . . . Don't you think it's horrible?"

Tom stared at his coffee.

"It's the way things are," he said slowly.

Presently they walked down the sloping dark aisle of the vaudeville theater, looking for seats. "Here are two," said Tom. A blackface singer, on the stage, was singing coarsely. The blinding disc of spotlight, with its chromatic red edge, illuminated his bluish make-up, made his tongue an unnatural pink, sparkled the gold fillings in his wide teeth. "Hot lips," he intoned, grinning, "That are pips. . . . And no more conscience than a snake has hips" . . . Tom took her gloved hand, inserted his finger in the opening, and stroked her palm. A delicious feeling of weakness, dissolution, came over her. Life suddenly seemed to her extraordinarily complex, beautiful and miserable. "By the waters of Watertown we sat down and wept, yea, we wept when we remembered Boston."



## THE LETTER

I AM a heartless creature, and I know it. I don't mean that I'm cruel. Far from it. I might diagnose myself more accurately by saying that I am a mixture of egoist and sentimentalist. I am at the same time exceptionally sensitive and exceptionally incapable of expressing my feelings: tongue-tied. Not only that, but I hate to be disturbed by the feelings of others—I run, I absolutely run, from anyone who starts telling me of any strong feelings. The sight of anyone crying upsets me horribly. I feel profoundly sorry, but I must admit that I also feel an acute and miserable disgust. This, of course, is simply egoism. I don't want the even tenor of my life interrupted or jangled in the slightest. I have gradually learned how to protect myself from unpleasant or disturbing contacts—I have become a sort of æsthetic mollusc, permitting entrance, into my cool little domain, only to nice little sensations, carefully selected and examined, in minute and exquisitely controlled quantities, nice little dosages. For this reason, I have always instinctively avoided intimate friendships and, of course, marriage. Either would be out of the question. Good heavens—! to think of having to tell a woman how passionately I loved her, or to have scenes with her, watch her contort her face, crying, kiss her tears away! Nothing,

nothing, could be more essentially horrible. The same thing is true of friendships. There is no such thing as a disinterested friend. There is something of the vampire in a friend. Their mouths, eyes, brains, hands are just so many weapons, tentacles with which they hope, sooner or later, to get into your heart, drink your blood. Yes, they come questing after you, prowl about you, always on the alert, always putting their cunning questions to you in hopes of getting you to expose yourself. Sympathy! Is it anything so simple as sympathy they want? No! they want a transfusion of life from you. They want you to live their life for them, to give them your brain, your blood, your heart! And what is sympathy, this need for sympathy, anyway? What indeed! I understand it perfectly: it is simply a vanity that wants to be encouraged, nine times out of ten. And how extraordinarily ingenious these friends are in getting you to perform this little massage of the soul for them! They have the cunning of cats, push against you and purr, gaze up at you with amorous phosphorescent eyes, pretending love, only in order to get their backs rubbed and their saucers filled! . . . And there is more, too. There is something in a friend, or a wife, which wants to devour you, which will not rest till it has torn you to pieces, destroyed you. They rend you for your secrets. They parade their own sores, hoping that you will be tempted to parade yours—shameful! horrible! Could anything be more disgusting? Yes, it is really that they want power over you, and this they seek by eating out the insides

of your consciousness; let them once get at you, sink their little tubes into your mind, they will slowly but surely exhaust you, and eventually will abandon you in the web, dry, light, and empty as the corpse of a fly.

For this reason, I have always denied myself friends, and sought only acquaintances. I have developed a special talent for the management of an acquaintance. The basis for this, of course, is my personal charm—why should I make any bones about it? I have no conceit about it, nor any illusions. I know it, and I deliberately and skilfully use it. I have discovered that there are very few people whom I cannot charm. I am a many-sided creature—perhaps a little hypocritical. Or it would be more just to say that I have keen perceptions for character, motive, and idiom, and, coupled with that keenness, a certain histrionic talent which permits me to act a part pleasing to my particular companion of the moment. Even this is not quite exact: for this talent is not quite so genuinely a talent as a profound instinct, a compulsion, perhaps analogous to protective coloration. No lounge lizard can be more languid luting, and lilylike than I, when the discretions of the tea-table must be tinklingly observed; but, on the other hand, no traveling salesman can be grosser, more violent, or half as Rabelaisian, as I in the smoking-room of a ship or Pullman. The same process governs my relations with everyone. I charm them by being sufficiently like themselves, but with an intriguing difference, a hint of depths and reserves and mysteries. They cannot make up their

minds whether I am stupid or fascinating, empty or profound. One minute—suppose I am talking with a wholesale chocolate dealer—I make some egregious blunder, in trying to show myself perfectly acquainted with the inside workings of such affairs as his: the chocolate dealer lowers his lids contemptuously at me, thinks me a fool. The next minute I correct the balance by nonchalantly dropping into it some quite astounding oddity of knowledge fished up from God knows what dark rich corner of my all-assimilating memory . . . But I never supply any clew to the strange unpredictable working of my mind: never. I cultivate the mystery, protect (but not too obviously) my reserve. There is a point at which I say (in effect) to an acquaintance—"Thus far, no farther." I do not bar, necessarily, an exchange of personal histories, providing it be analytical and detached, anæsthetic. But that kind of exchange of personal confession which is really a mutual exhibitionism—tense, tremulous, erotic—I ruthlessly prevent. If necessary (it sometimes is) I simply take flight. I drop the acquaintance like a hot cake.

But here I must make an important qualification, which has a direct bearing on the incident (trifling in itself) which I am about to relate. Namely, while I avoid intimacies as I would avoid leprosy, nevertheless I have a private and all-devouring *curiosity* as to the lives, the intimate secret feelings, of others. I never see a postman emptying letters out of a mailbox into his gray bag without wanting passionately to read

them all. The point is this—that the sight of a human being undergoing a crisis, victim of powerful emotions, thrills and delights me, provided that I can be a concealed witness, watch the drama unobserved. The stronger his feelings, the more abandoned his exhibition of them, the more outrageous or singular his behavior—the more intense my pleasure: always provided—and this is the crux of the matter—that I shall never incur any connection or responsibility. I have always, since early childhood, taken a pleasure in spying on people—through a keyhole, through a chink in a wall, through a window—any way will serve. I have often stood for hours, in an agony of suspense, stiff in every muscle from the effort to stand perfectly still, watching some commonplace person or persons doing commonplace things in the room next to mine. The strange antics of people when they are left alone by themselves! I remember one man who every night before going to bed went through a peculiar ritual in front of his mirror. He began by putting a lighted candle by the glass—I suppose to get a sharp light from below his face—and then, bringing his face close to the mirror, he started, solemnly and silently, making faces at himself—the most extraordinary and horrible faces conceivable. The same faces frequently recurred. There was one he was apparently very fond of, since he repeated it almost every night. It started as a fantastic thick-lipped grin which spread like pink rubber from ear to ear; his blue eyes, with an insane gleam in them (and something wildly affectionate, amorous)

opened terrifyingly wide; and then, from the midst of this brilliant expression of demoniac delight, suddenly his amazing tongue shot out, a tongue with genius, which flickered with incredible swiftness up and down (I could hear it flapping!) and then shot in again. This would be repeated half a dozen times. Occasionally he would hold the candle under his chin, trying the effect of shadows. And he always leaned very close to the mirror, to enjoy the full flavor of that astounding elastic grin of idiotic bliss. Then, abruptly, he would blow out the candle, become perfectly ordinary: a little morose, yawn once or twice, and go to bed.

Of course, I recognize quite clearly the springs of this strange appetite which so often masters me, this curiosity which leads me to the lowest and most sneaking of espionage: it is starvation, starvation of life. My egoism, my sensitiveness, which together make it impossible for me to cultivate friendships, have ended by shutting me in my own little padded cell. A comfortable cell, certainly—how could it not be, since it was precisely out of a need for comfort that I manufactured it? But decidedly circumscribed. Four paces forward—four paces back; and a little high bright window, like the finder of a camera, in which I can see the world in little, its tiny trees very green, its tiny houses very pink, everything distinct and well-colored as a new toy . . . Ah, but everything so remote and so external! Nothing that I can reach, nothing that I can hear! That is where the trouble



comes. Sooner or later my craving for the intimately human becomes insupportable. I become restless. I ride in buses or street-cars, choosing the crowded hours, for the pure love of feeling myself part of a crowd, part of that strange, blind, laborious, multicellular animal—man. I move to a new boarding-house, and make myself very agreeable to its denizens, feeling them all over with my subtle antennæ, as the ant does the aphid, in search of the sweet nutritious juice of character. I hover in unlighted halls, listening furtively to the fragments of conversation which I can hear going on behind closed doors, the conversations of the long-time-intimate, irregular, laconic, so irrecoverably easy, spontaneous and natural, punctuated with long pauses. I sit in the park, watching all the people who pass, nursemaids, priests, children, ladies with toy-dogs, policemen—I positively devour them. How delicious, in the evening, a moonlight evening in May or June, to sit in the Public Gardens under a poplar by the water's edge, choosing a bench near which other people are sitting, perhaps young people in love! . . . How delightful, too, to sit in the newspaper room of the Library, pretending to read the want ads in search of a job, and all the while watching the poor creatures, drab and dishevelled, who come there daily hoping to find at last for themselves the perfect "situation" (as cook, or fireman, or gardener) or at any rate a week-or-two's wages . . . At such moments I come alive, my enjoyment of myself is renewed.



But the greatest event in my life was the receipt of a letter. That may seem a strange thing to say—stranger still is the fact that it happened; that my life has been so barren of event that the mere receipt of a letter could be of such importance in it. Nevertheless, it is literally true that this letter afforded me the profoundest emotions which I have ever experienced, and came nearest to satisfying completely my craving for—ah! For what? I must admit it, then: my suppressed craving for an intimate friendship. The receipt of this letter was really, as I have come to see, the perfect solution of my particular personal problem. It was in the nature of a confession, an outpouring; it was not intended particularly for me; it was from a man of whom I have never heard; and it could not possibly involve me, therefore, in any responsibilities. In the last fact, to be sure, resides the quintessential beauty, for me, of the experience. I was as free to enjoy this man's agony as I would be to enjoy a work of art.

The letter came into my hands in a peculiar way—or was it very natural? I was staying for a month in a certain boarding-house on St. Botolph Street, in Boston. In the entrance hall of this boarding-house (a gloomy unlighted place which always smelled of frying fish) a letter rack hung on the wall near the front door, above an umbrella stand. It was of green baize, criss-crossed with tape, and letters were stuck under the tape. It must have been about a week after I went to live there that I first paid any attention

to this particular letter, and realized that it had been staying in the rack day after day without being claimed. It appeared to have been wandering up and down St. Botolph Street for some time—the envelope was scrawled and scored all over with such remarks as “Not at Number Such-and-Such,” and “Try No. So-and-So.” It was addressed to a Mr. Stephen Ramsay (not my own name). Several days passed, no one seemed to pay any attention to the letter. The maid forgot, I suppose, to give it back to the postman; and it was there, late one evening, that the idea occurred to me of taking it myself. No one was in the hall at the time—nothing could be simpler. I suddenly felt that a letter like this, a lost letter, a voice, so to speak, crying into the abyss and getting no answer, must be peculiarly interesting. I even justified my impulse by saying to myself that after all it was better that the wrong person should read it than that no one should read it at all. “Why not?” I said to myself, and the next minute I was going up the stairs two at a time with the letter in my pocket. In my room, when I had lighted the gas, I began opening the letter with great care, so that if necessary I could seal it up again and replace it on the rack. This proved quite simple as the flap had not been completely gummed. Then, too excited to sit down, and absurdly frightened lest anyone should come in and discover what I was up to (what a delicious flavor that imparted!) I stood by the chest of drawers, under the light, and read the letter.

Southdene, May the second.

Dear Sir:

I do not know who you are, and you presumably never heard of me, but just the same I have now decided to take this step, and I hope you won't be offended. I don't even feel sure that this letter will ever be finishd or posted, or that supposing I ever do post it, it will be delivered to you. To tell the truth, I got your name out of the Boston Street Directory, one that was several years old, and how do I know that Stephen Ramsay, real estate agent, still lives at that address, or, for that matter, still lives in Boston, or how do I know for sure that he's alive at all? You may be dead, or gone to China; in that case this letter will wind up in the Dead Letter Office some day, and will be read there. Still, I feel fairly sure that you will get it. Though it doesn't make much difference one way or the other. *Somebody* is bound to read it, sooner or later, and that's the main thing. That's how I happened to pick on you to write to, but it doesn't explain why I should want to write to you, and that's not so easy to explain. Maybe it's just because I'm queer. Leave it at that, if you like. That's what everybody always thought—my family (they're all dead) always thought I was slightly cracked, even when I was a kid. I never understood this myself, and it seemed to me that I was just like anybody else, except that I'm sort of queer looking, my face twisted, one eye higher than the other and my jaw sticking out a little to the left. But it's a fact

that I was never popular in school and never had any friends either then or afterwards when I went into newspaper work. I didn't understand this, and it worried me a good deal—I tried to be friendly, and it was as if I always did or said something which displeased people without my knowing it. They were decent to me, but they never asked me to join a party. Nobody ever came to see me, and in the newspaper office, which was a kind of cheerful slap-you-on-the-back sort of place, I noticed that I was the only one who didn't have some sort of nickname. *Is there something queer about me?* Once I read an ad that got me excited, about "Have You a Pleasing Personality?" and thought of taking a correspondence course in hopes that it was just tactlessness, but I got discouraged about it. What was the use? If it was my personality that was doing the harm, how in God's name was anyone going to change it for me? You can't change your personality the way you'd change a shirt. And besides, I was never convinced that there was anything wrong with it. I was always serious-minded, I admit that, and a lot of people seem to think being serious is a crime. Well, I don't understand that at all. No, sir. Life is serious, and you might as well admit it as run around like a lot of headless hens dead without knowing it. That isn't my idea at all, not at all.

However, it's too late in the day for me to begin complaining about the way people live. Let them live the way they like. All I'm trying to do is to

explain how it is that I've never had a friend in my life, not one; whether it's because of a lack in other folks or a lack in me I'm not wise enough to say. And that's the reason why I'm writing to you. Here I am forty-five years old, and I feel suddenly as if I must talk to somebody. That's what it comes down to! It's a foolish thing to do, and I daresay it will seem to you to prove it up to the hilt that I *am* queer, or half-insane. Well, you can believe it or not, but I'm as sane as any man alive. I may be doing a queer thing, and I admit I am, but I've got plenty of reasons for it, as I could show you soon enough if I could only talk to you. Writing a letter is a slow business, and it gets between you and all the things you want to say. What I chiefly want to talk about is my forty-fifth birthday, which occurred five weeks ago. I think it must be one of the most remarkable forty-fifth birthdays a man ever had. I was still living and working in Boston then, having a room just behind Symphony Hall (where I used to go to concerts occasionally). For a couple of weeks I hadn't been feeling very well—felt feverish, coughed a good deal, slept badly and with a great many nightmares. On Wednesday, the day before my birthday, I had a particularly bad spell of coughing just after I got up in the morning, and when I was brushing my teeth. It ended in my vomiting a little blood, after which I fainted, and found myself lying beside the wash-basin—it's a wonder I didn't hit my head against it when I fell. That frightened me a little,

but I didn't go to see a doctor about it till the next day, Thursday, my forty-fifth birthday. All day Wednesday, working at the office, I wondered whether I ought to see a doctor, and I came near asking Foley, the city editor, what he thought about it, but each time I thought, oh, hell! what's the use, he'd be bored at hearing about my private affairs. But Thursday morning, my birthday, I went. I'm not used to seeing doctors, and I was pretty well scared in advance. With reason, too, as it turned out. After a three-hour examination the doctor told me that I had advanced tuberculosis in both lungs, and that with good luck I could live about two years. That was my birthday present.

I got out of the doctor's office just before noon. It was a nice day, I remember, but I didn't notice it much. I was like a blind man. I never knew it was possible to be so unhappy, to be so shut up in yourself with suffering. I walked into the Public Gardens almost without knowing what I was doing, crossed the little suspension bridge, where I stood for a minute watching the sailors rowing their sweethearts round the pond, and then I bought a ticket and did a thing I'd never done before—got into a swan-boat and went solemnly round the pond, sitting in a red seat with a lot of children round me. What does a man think in a situation like that? Does he rightly think at all? I don't believe he does. Anyway I know I was to all intents insane—full of violent obscure feelings, wanting to do something astonishing. I wanted to yell, or start throwing children into the water, or jump



into the shallow myself and run after the ducks. Looking at that willow tree on the little island, with its long leaves hanging like hair into the water, I felt as if I'd like to burst out crying! and I don't suppose I'd thought about crying since I was seven years old—I can remember distinctly the last time I ever cried, one day when I was being whipped for telling a lie; I remember deciding that crying did no good. And the children, too, made me feel queer. I don't know as it had ever occurred to me to feel sorry for children before—why should it? Why should one feel sorry for children? But all of a sudden I did; I could hardly bear to look at them, thinking of what helpless things they were, and what a God-awful nightmare of a universe they had strayed into. Poor little devils! tuberculosis lies in wait for you like a pest; cancer opens its jaws like a trap. I felt like telling them, seriously, not to be so beautiful and happy, and the world wasn't at all what they thought it was. I felt like hurting them, so as to give them a sort of warning, or bursting their balloons for them. A little boy in the seat in front of me, wearing brown leggings and a brown toque, had a blue-painted tin drum hung from his neck, which in the excitement of the swan-boat he had forgotten: he held the drumsticks awry in his mittens and stared at the water. I seriously thought of snatching his drum and flinging it into the pond. That will show you what sort of state I was in.

It may explain also the strange things I did later—my state of mind, I mean. First, I went to Foley



and told him I was through with my job. I didn't tell him why—I just said, as if I was angry about something, that I was through. He gave me the queerest look I ever saw in his face—hurt and surprised. "What's the dope?" he said. I walked out without explaining, without saying good-by to a soul. I felt sore at the whole crowd of them. Why should I have felt this curious anger? Was it just jealousy? I have come since to think that's what it was. I'm sort of ashamed of it. It would have been only decent to say something pleasant to Foley, and also to Miss Edwards. God knows I had a lot to be grateful for to Miss Edwards—Ann, we always called her—one or two concert tickets almost every week; for she did the concerts and couldn't always go herself. But no: out I ran, without a word. I avoided Thompson's where I knew all the crowd would be, and went instead to a Waldorf, in Bromfield Street, for lunch. It was while I was eating my baked beans and brown bread that I saw on the back page of my paper an advertisement of a house for sale at Southdene, Mass. There was a picture of the house: a typical little high-roofed white shingled sea-captain's house of the late eighteenth century. I knew exactly the sort of house it was—I had been down the Cape—and I suddenly felt that it was just the thing I wanted. I could buy it, and still have enough money in the bank to see me through. Why not? . . . Well, why not? . . . I was so busy thinking about it that I forgot to say hello to Miss Halloran, the cashier, when I went out, a nice

girl that I gave concert tickets to occasionally. I just put down the money and walked out, and then walked down Washington Street past the Orpheum Theater where I had so many good times, and then down Summer Street to the South Station. There was a train in fifteen minutes. At half-past four I was in the village of Southdene, where I have been ever since, except for one day in town to get my things and arrange about transferring my money to the Southdene Savings Bank. As good luck would have it the owner of the house was in it, consulting the carpenter about a leak in the kitchen lean-to roof. He showed me through the house. It was exactly what I wanted, except that it needed new shingles on the roof and papering and painting. It had never in my life occurred to me to buy a house. What in God's name would I want a house for? And what in God's name did I want a house for now? To die in? I suppose so! The idea was fantastic. But besides, it was my forty-fifth birthday. I walked up and down through the stuffy little rooms, climbed the stairs and looked out of the back window at the Mill River, where a lot of dirty little fishing-sloops were pulled up in the marsh grass. I went out and prowled about the small garden, which had gone to ruin, all grown up with poplar suckers. There was the remains of an old lilac hedge at one side, screening the garden from the house next door. It was just coming into leaf. At the other side of the house was a row of pine trees. Well, it was queer, or else I'm queer, but suddenly it

was as if the earth (or rather the sand) took possession of me. That abandoned old wreck of a house with its little ruin of a garden seemed to be just waiting for me. A dying house for a dying man. That notion tickled me, and I was tickled also by thinking how surprised Mr. Hough, the owner, would be if he knew why I was buying it. "I'll take it," I said to him, and gave him a check for fifty dollars down.

May the third.

A week later I was actually installed in my house with a few sticks of furniture that I had picked up here and there, doing my own cooking (which didn't amount to much) and spending practically all my time fixing up loose panes of glass, broken floor-boards, painting window-sills, and so on. And that's exactly what I've been doing now in all the five weeks that I've been here. It's just what I need. It keeps my hands busy, and I can see the results of my work. I don't mean that I ever can forget for very long that I'm a dying man. No, not at all. But it gives me a funny sort of a feeling of satisfaction, first, to realize that while I'm dying myself I'm somehow putting something of my life into this old house, making it alive again, resurrecting it, actually putting into it in the process something of myself which will go on living after I'm in my grave; and, secondly, it gives me a strange feeling of *powerfulness*—that's the only way I can think of saying it—to make all my neighbors here think of me as a man who is *just starting*

out. That's exactly what they all think about me. "Well," says old Brakefield, who keeps the tobacco shop, "you're making a nice little place of it to live in." Terence, who comes in to help me with the garden, digging up poplar roots (we had to dig a hole six feet across and six feet deep to get out one old stump) told me that in a couple of years I'd have a nice garden. This year, the spring was too far advanced for putting in any shrubs or trees, but we've already decided to carry the lilac hedge right round the three sides, and set out some apple and pear trees in the middle. As a matter of fact, I did set out two plum trees, which seem to be doing all right, if only the hot weather doesn't come too soon. I feel the irony of all this. In a way it's the thing I enjoy most of all. At the same time I admit that a good part of my pleasure in it is in the temptation, which I always feel, every minute, to blurt the whole thing out. To anybody I know, like Foley, or Ann, for instance, I couldn't say a word—not a word. I don't want to see them ever again, or hear from them. But to some stranger—that would be different. That's why I sit here at two o'clock in the night writing this letter on my kitchen table by an oil lamp.

And today, this afternoon, when the two carpenters were here, putting a new floor in the bathroom, it was all I could do to keep my mouth shut. It was only some queer sort of timidity that kept me from telling the whole story. I sat in the sitting room trying to read a book while they worked, but I listened to

everything they said. They have a funny kind of teasing banter which they keep up all the time they work, the same remarks over and over again, sort of sulkily humorous. "By God, we'll never be able to get under that bathtub to tack down them boards, Charlie." "Hop up, with it, Bill, hop up with it!" Bill spits. "No, sir, never in the world, will we be able, as the books say, to tack down them boards under that bathtub," "What in God's name did I do with my bit, Bill? *Where* is it, *where* is it?" . . . A pause, while nails are driven, or a board planed, and then Charlie, for the fiftieth time, observes once more, "Hop up with it, Bill, hop up with it." Several times during the afternoon I went in and chatted with them while they worked. Each time, watching Charlie turning his bit to bore nail holes through the flanges of the thin white strips of oak, I thought how it would sound, and how surprised they would be, but I couldn't manage to get started, or even drop a hint of it. I went out and walked in the garden, thinking about it. It seemed a simple enough thing to do—here were two ordinary kindly human beings doing their work, only too pleased to have me talk to them and vary the monotony for them a little bit: and here was I, an ex-newspaper man, aged forty-five, dying of t.b., and so absolutely alone in the world that I hadn't been able to tell a soul of my predicament. An animal, if it's hurt, yells; so does a child. It seems a fairly reasonable thing to do. Why, then, couldn't I yell—why not? I watched Mr. Riley spreading his nets out on the

grass, his black cat sniffing at the net to smell the fish. Why couldn't I go and tell Bill and Charlie, which was what I really wanted to do? I began making up the conversation in my mind, and trying to imagine how they would receive the announcement. I stared into a lilac bush and said to myself: "Well, speaking of birthdays, which I heard Bill doing just now, I guess my forty-fifth was one of the most remarkable birthdays a man ever had." . . . Bill, not looking up from his work would reply politely, "How's that, Mr. Thorndike?" This was the crucial moment. Everything depended now on getting the right tone of voice for my next remark—no sob-stuff, and not too much of a snarl either, but something natural and easy. I smiled into the lilac bush . . . "Well, at twelve o'clock on that day my doctor told me I'd be a dead man in two years, or even less; at half-past twelve I quit my job; at half-past one I was on a train going to a village I'd never seen in my life; and at five o'clock I had bought a house there, spending almost a half of a lifetime's savings to do it. And here I am . . ." How would they take it? Be embarrassed? Most likely. Brooding about it, I found myself still staring into the lilac bush, and I felt ashamed and walked away from it, looking at the river and the dirty fishing-sloops. Supposing I was to tell Mr. Riley? I might go fishing with him, as he had suggested, and tell him in the boat: there would be plenty of opportunity, and he couldn't run away. But no—there was some kind of a gulf between us that couldn't be



crossed. Not only was he much older than I, but I had the feeling that growing up as he had, in the country here, working hard with his hands all his life in every weather, in season or out, in bad health or good, he had got that curious indifference to life and death that animals have. He wouldn't be either surprised or upset, or if he was surprised it would only be at my taking a trifle so seriously . . . Perhaps Bill and Charlie would feel the same way. I came in again and borrowed Bill's hammer to put up a couple of pictures (prints of clipper ships) in the dining-room. I decided that I would speak about it nonchalantly when I returned the hammer. As I approached the bathroom, Charlie was saying again, "Hop up with it, Bill, hop up a bit," and when I entered Bill immediately spoke to me about the prints, which he had seen. It turned out he was keen on sailing, and he'd twice been in the crew of an American Cup defender. So we discussed yachting and clipper ships till it was time for him to go.

Life is a queer thing. I don't understand it at all, not at all. Why is it that now, when I know I'm dying, when I can see myself getting thinner and weaker every day, I'm happier in a way than I've ever been before, and have found for the first time in my forty-five years a way of living that suits me? It's a puzzle. Anyway, there it is. I like being here, this old house with the moonlight on it is a great joy to me. I like to sit here in the complete night silence hearing now and then a poplar twig fall on the roof—

the sound mystified me at first, I thought it was a ghost. It's nice to go out into the garden in the night and look at the two plum trees to see how they're getting on—I actually feel a crazy impulse to take them by the hand or put my arms round them. I feel like saying to them—"Grow up, plum trees! and when I am dead, lying dead in the little Quaker graveyard, tell the new tenants that Thorndike planted you and looked after you like a father . . ." After all, I don't need to tell anybody that I'm dying. I can stick it out . . . And besides, I've now had the satisfaction of telling *you*, whoever you are. If you're a happy man I hope I've shaken your confidence in the world a little. If you're unhappy, I hope I've consoled you. Don't answer this, burn my letter, but think about me.

yrs

WILLIAM S. THORNDIKE.

This letter, I am frank to say, quite bowled me over. Could there be a more exquisite case of what I mentioned as that instinct for exhibitionism, tremulously erotic, which underlies every friendship? There is something revolting in it: I do not think the term is too strong. Absurd, this impulse to show one's sores to one another! Yet, I suppose it is no more absurd, not a bit, than the curiosity which, in my own case, parallels it. The spectacle of me, a human being (an ordinary kindly human being!) standing there at night and literally devouring, in the gaslight, this creature's helpless misery, devouring it with the cold ferocity of

a spectator—that too has about it something decidedly unpleasant, and not altogether flattering to human nature. The jackal is our brother. I make no apology for it—not the slightest. The reading of this letter gave me perhaps the keenest pleasure I have ever experienced. I read it through twice without sitting down, and when I put it back in its envelope, I found that I was trembling. Extraordinary being! What was he really like? As I prepared to go to bed, I began wondering what sort of man he might be—attractive at all? Unpleasant? Merely commonplace and uninteresting? And suddenly it occurred to me that it would be quite simple to go and see him—that is, to have a look at him. I could go down and spend a Sunday, look at him from a distance, and return unscathed. The idea excited me so much that I could hardly sleep.

The journey itself proved rather a nuisance. It was an exceptionally hot day, the train was insufferably dirty and uncomfortable, and I was quite out of temper by the time I reached Southdene. There, however, a sea-wind was blowing, which revived me. I found the house without difficulty, by inquiry at the tobacconist's. "Right round the corner," he said, spitting into his stove; and right round the corner it was, instantly recognizable; a shabby little white-shingled cottage, rain-stained and moss-grown, with a row of pines beside it. The windows were all open, except one at the front; and at this a tall thin man was working, apparently puttying, with his back turned to me.

He had on a greasy-looking pair of khaki trousers and a gray flannel shirt. He was bareheaded, and his hair was the most unmitigatedly red I have ever seen. Was it possible—? It must be. I strolled close to him. His profile was pleasant, a freckled Roman nose and straight brow, and as he turned, hearing me, he showed large brown eyes, one distinctly higher than the other, which gave the whole pale twisted face a surprised and gnome-like look. The mouth was wide and sensitive, a little drooped at one corner. He held a putty-knife in his hand. "A hot day!" I murmured, smiling. He smiled in return, somewhat shyly—a little taken aback—and answered, "Yes, isn't it!" And that was the end, the logical end. Though later, just before I left, I saw him in his garden, standing before one of his plum trees. The tree was about four feet high. He was looking at it, and rubbing his chin . . .

I remember hearing a story of a man at Harvard College, who, being friendless and lonely, and having observed that the more popular men were always, in the spring evenings, being called to their windows by the shouts of their friends from the yard below, conceived the happy idea of doing this little office for himself. He would turn out his light, run down the stairs, and then, in the moonlight before the building, cry up to his own dark window—"Oh! Reinhart! . . . Oh! Reinhart!" . . . Finally somebody recognized Reinhart, and was immensely amused. It started a new college tradition; every evening at about ten

o'clock windows would open, heads would lean out, and long cries, melancholy, rang through the yard—"Oh! Rheinhardt! . . . Oh, Rheinhardt!" . . . I always think with extraordinary pleasure of that story; and I always associate Rheinhardt with Thorndike.

## THE ANNIVERSARY

CHARLES CLEGHORN and his friend Jackson were playing billiards in the smoky billiard room in the basement of their club. They were both middle-aged, both bald, and neither of them played well. They walked a little heavily round the table, chalked their cues with unnecessary frequency, laughed a good deal at shots fantastically bad, and occasionally paused for passages of laconic conversation. It was Cleghorn who had suggested the game of billiards. He was fond of Jackson (a doctor) but knew from long experience that a whole evening in Jackson's company became fatiguing unless they "did something." Usually, when they arranged to dine together, they went afterwards to the Casino, which could always be relied upon for a vivid burlesque show. They both enjoyed a good burlesque show, one with plenty of legs, laughter, smut, and "snappy music," the sort of show in which the brilliantly blonde heroine comes out to the foot-lights dressed in the star-spangled banner—and dressed, as it turns out at the end of the cheap patriotic song, to which her gilded slippers have been beating time, *only* in the star-spangled banner. This sort of thing always pleased them: they nudged each other. Cleghorn, fiddling with the end of his grayish mustache, felt that he would like to know a girl like that. He



entertained fleeting thoughts of meetings at stage-doors, taxi rides late at night, perhaps a champagne party in a secretly kept flat, or in a shabby hotel. The idea of the expense, however, always frightened him. Taxis, flats, champagne, little suppers at hotels—one couldn't indulge in these unless one were rich, or unmarried. Also, he had always been very respectable, and he was afraid of being seen. And also, he wasn't sure that he would know how to go about it. He suspected that Jackson knew a great deal—but Jackson never talked freely of his own adventures with women, had always assumed that Cleghorn was, in this regard, inviolably respectable. This understanding had existed between them for seventeen years, and had become sacred.

"I wonder if it's still snowing," said Cleghorn, sitting down for a moment with his cue between his knees.

"Sure, it's snowing. It's going to snow all night."

"I hope to God the cars are running. I'd hate to walk all the way from the Square in this."

"Good for you . . . You don't get enough exercise anyway."

Jackson stooped beside the table, flushing, to get the cue-bridge. He arose with the bridge clutched in a plump pink hand, tight-skinned. He gave a puff, blowing out his cheeks. Cleghorn laughed.

"Well, I don't lose my wind when I stoop for a bridge, anyway," he said. "You're getting fat, Henry."

"Don't be personal."

"I know why it is, too." He gave a sly smile, which

had the effect of pushing his gray mustache up towards his spectacles. Jackson, calm, absorbed, leveled his cue along the bridge and began aiming it at the white ball. Cleghorn knew that he was listening, and went on. "It's all this high living. All these little parties."

Jackson made his stroke sharply, and snorted, following the balls with an angry eye.

"What parties? . . . You don't know what you're talking about."

"Ha! don't I! . . . My detectives inform me, Henry, of your every gesture."

"Oh! they do, do they? A lot of good may it do them."

Cleghorn sighed, rose, walked heavily round the lighted table, peered closely and near-sightedly at each ball in turn.

"Ah! I wish to God I wasn't married," he said. "I'd show you some tricks, Henry!"

"You don't know what you're talking about. . . . Have a lemonade?"

Cleghorn gave a violent shot which made the cue-ball leap off the table. It crashed to the floor, and rolled to the wall.

"If I couldn't play billiards any better than that," Jackson continued evenly, "I'd sell out and keep pigs. I'd be ashamed of myself."

"Well, I'll bet you I can pick it up without losing my wind, anyway. And that's something."

He picked up the ball and dropped it with a little thump on the green baize. Then, by a tacit agreement

they sat down, somewhat wearily, in two chairs by the wall, both holding their cues between their knees.

"Some women," said Jackson after a moment, "are damn fools."

"You surprise me, Henry. . . . Have a cigarette."

"No, thanks. . . . Yes. . . . A patient telephoned me this morning at ten o'clock, to say that she had started to have a hemorrhage, and what should she do. It's a childbirth case with a threat of abruptio. We've been expecting it to happen. I told her to get a taxi and run straight to the hospital—not to stop a minute. I telephoned to the hospital and had everything ready. Thomas was there. I was there myself in twenty minutes. And that woman took *three hours* to get to the hospital—*three hours!* As a result of which she's dying."

"What on earth made her do that?"

Jackson stared at the green lights over the billiard table.

"Oh, she wanted the proper clothes with her—did a regular packing up, as if she was going for a holiday at Palm Beach. . . . Lots of them do that. . . . They've got to have their best Sunday-go-to-meeting nighties. . . . And there she is."

"Really dying?"

"I think so. A transfusion didn't help. I'm expecting a call any time tonight. Thomas is there."

Cleghorn felt depressed. Seeing people die was no joke. Supposing he had, at this hour, on such a night, to go slopping through a foot of snow and slush to a

hospital, all to watch a foolish woman die? . . . All the same he envied Jackson. Jackson had more experience in a day than he himself had in a decade. All sorts of queer intimacies and insights. Intimacies with young women. The nurses, too, of course. The doctors weren't supposed to know the nurses. But then—! . . . Besides, was it any worse for Jackson to trot off to a hospital on a winter night than for himself to trot home, every night in the year, to Clara? . . .

"I wonder if it's still snowing," he said, morosely.

"Sure it's snowing. Snowing like hell, probably. Thank God I put the chains on my car this morning."

"Tomorrow's the fifteenth anniversary of my wedding."

"Go on!" . . . Jackson was surprised, goggled at Cleghorn with round protruding eyes, apoplectic.

"What does that make it—brass?" . . . Cleghorn was sardonic. "The twenty-fifth is silver."

"I don't know. It ought to be something pretty good after fifteen."

Jackson took a slow deep breath and, seeming to become absent-minded, stared at the floor, inclining his head against his cue, and rubbing his forehead against the cool polished wood. He moved his head softly from side to side, staring.

"Well," he said with a kind of abstracted gentleness, "I think that deserves a little drink." He turned and pressed a button in the wall. "A health drunk in near-beer never hurt anyone."

"Beer is thicker than water," Cleghorn replied, "but not much."

The two men sighed almost simultaneously and became silent. Cleghorn, leaning his head back on the chair, blew a turbulent cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, propelling into it, at the end, a rapid succession of small swimming rings. He watched them admiringly. Wedding rings. Wedding rings of smoke. Smoke, but horribly binding, just the same. What a simple solution if Clara had only, like this woman at the hospital—what was it Henry called it? . . .

"I sometimes wonder why it was you never married, Henry." His expression was a little malicious.

The boy brought their drinks on a tray, pulled the little table near to them and carried away their cues. Jackson lifted his glass.

"I would have, Charlie, if I'd been as lucky as you. Here's how—happy returns!"

"Well, I'd swap with you for nothing—for an old doughnut and a pair of emasculated garters."

Jackson growled, frowning into his beer, where he seemed to see something that annoyed him.

"You don't know what you're talking about. Swap? By God, *I'd* swap, let me tell you."

"All right then—you go home to Clara tonight, and I'll take your case at the hospital. Also the key to your secret flat," Cleghorn gave a peculiar self-conscious laugh. Over the rim of his beer glass he eyed Jackson with an uneasy challenge.

"You make me tired when you talk like that. You

ought to know better. . . . What the devil do you mean by the key to my secret flat?"

"Don't be so coy, Henry. The nice little flat where you entertain your chorus girl friends. . . . Ah, I wish to God I wasn't married! I'd show you some tricks."

"Phhhh! You make me sick. Chorus girls! What do you think I am?"

"My detectives watch you night and day, Henry. You've been seen putting your bald head out of your car window in the alley behind the Casino. Lulu, the star-spangled queen, was seen to leap in beside you, giving a loud parrot scream of delight, and scattering diamonds. At the oyster house, later, it was observed that you devoured two dozen oysters and a hen lobster, while Lulu worshiped. . . . Introduce me to Lulu, Henry. I'd like to know her."

"Who the devil is Lulu? . . . You're crazy. . . ."

Cleghorn laughed, and then sighed.

"I like to talk through my hat," he said. "If I'm not crazy already I'd as lief be. . . . You can talk till all is blue about the sacred joys of married life, but I'm sick of it."

Jackson, at this, gave a quick startled look at Cleghorn, who was staring at the ceiling. He opened his lips as if to say something, but then, instead, lifted his glass, turned it meditatively around, and took a deep drink.

"Funny I haven't heard from the hospital," he murmured. He looked at his watch. "Nine o'clock."

There was a pause, during which the two men stared



across the smoky room, watching three players who moved about a table at the other side, having a noisy game of cowboy-pool. "Put the five in the corner pocket," one of them shouted. "Ah, he's got a glass eye and a wooden arm," said another. The shot was made, and all three shrieked with laughter, thumping the butts of their cues against the floor. "The boy has brains! The boy's clever!" . . .

"I think I'll get drunk tonight," said Cleghorn, reflectively smiling, and pushing his gray mustache up towards his spectacles. "At that place on Atlantic Avenue."

"Don't be a fool. That rot-gut whisky!"

"That's all right—it's got plenty of kick."

"It'll kick you over the fence into eternity one of these days."

"So much the better. . . . You think I'm joking, Henry, but I'm perfectly serious."

"Serious about what?"

"Married life. . . ."

"Are you still worrying about that?"

"Worrying? No. I've made up my mind, that's all."

"Oh."

"It's a queer thing, you know, how deep a disgust can go. Right into the most vital and living part of your consciousness. . . . So that you hate the physical with a hatred—" He broke off, making a tense, spasmodic clawlike gesture with his hand. His eyes were

opened rather wide. "If only we could get rid of the whole thing!"

Jackson goggled angrily at Cleghorn.

"What's eating you? . . . What do you say, shall we finish the game?"

He was still staring at Cleghorn when the page came into the room with a slip of paper in his hand. "Dr. Jackson!" he bawled, walking. "Dr. Jackson!"

"Here!" said Jackson, rising. "Good night, Charlie. . . . Take my advice and go home like a good boy. See you Tuesday." He rested his plump pink hand on Cleghorn's shoulder for a second, beamed, and walked briskly away.

For a few minutes, Cleghorn sat perfectly still, staring at the green-shaded lights and watching the tobacco smoke coil into them in lazy clouds. He felt miserably a sense of defeat. He had hoped to draw out Jackson, or at any rate to compel him to listen, and had for some reason felt a peculiar need for a heart-to-heart discussion. It had been useless to attempt it. With Jackson, the attempt was always useless. Jackson always growled and changed the subject, or became inarticulate, or pretended to misunderstand. . . . Good old Henry. . . . The three young men began arguing loudly at the table on the far side of the room, flourishing their cues. "Of course I put it up—you were seventy-nine before and now you're eighty-four—what could be simpler? . . . Solid ivory!" . . . Cleghorn felt angry with them, rose, and walked heavily out of the room and up the stairs. He went

and looked out from the reading-room window, lifting the shade, to see if it was still snowing. It was snowing hard. Long white diagonals flew in straight lines under the arc light at the corner. A horse-drawn newspaper wagon went by, the horse plodding slowly in deep snow, his head down, his hoofs not making a sound. A taxi stood opposite the club, with white-drifted roof and a blanket flung over the radiator. It had a derelict look. "Escape!" it seemed to say—"Adventure! Mystery!" . . . He recalled stories of men who had engaged cabs simply saying to the driver, "If you know a good place, take me to it. Here's a dollar. Here's five dollars. Here's a thousand dollars. . . . Take me to the Queen of Sheba. Take me to the number of numbers in the street of streets. 1770 Washington Street. No. 2,876,452 Eternity Street. Minus seven Insanity Street. . . . Anywhere you like." . . . Dropping the window shade, Cleghorn went to the coat room for his hat and coat. A young man came in, stamping snow off his feet on the marble floor. "A taxi," said Cleghorn to Peters, the doorman. "There's one at the door now, sir." "Oh, is there? Thanks." . . . A large snowflake crashed coldly into his left ear. "Rowe's Wharf!" he shouted to the driver, who as he inclined his face to listen reached a hand to turn down the flag.

The taxi bumped softly through the snow, while Cleghorn smoked a cigarette. Swarms of flakes flew past the windows. The streets were almost deserted. They passed an electric snow plow moaning along the

car tracks with slipping wheels. Delightful, to be running away like this—not a soul in the world knew where he was. Old Henry bungling stupidly off to the hospital in Brookline to watch the death of Mrs. Feldeinsamkeit; Clara reading a magazine before a fire of wet logs; Lulu, the star-spangled queen coming down to the footlights, rubbing one pink knee rhythmically, caressingly against the other, and singing "Come on; take a chance, and we'll dance to that syncopated mellow-dee"; while he, in a taxi, smoking, escaped through the wild, wild night, soundless and trackless. Was Henry in love with Clara? Ha, ha! what an idea. Let him have her, then. A good solution. . . . "Are you dying, Mrs. Feldeinsamkeit? . . ." "Dying, doctor, dying." . . . "Give me your rings then, and your gold watch with the lock of hair in it, and the twenty-dollar gold piece which you wear round your neck. Sign your name along the dotted line, or, if you cannot see, make a cross. You hereby solemnly declare that you are about to die; that you are already dead from the soles of your feet to your breastbone; that you have no longer a heart, or any of the grosser appetites, or a digestive system; that you have only the signal beauty of your face and the waning light of your brain, and these, too, presently being dead, you will be dead forever. You give me your solemn oath that you will not again countenance existence in the flesh or in the spirit, in this world or in any other. In witness whereof you affix hereto your name, FELDEINSAMKEIT." . . . "I swear." . . . "Nurse, remove the pillow from be-

neath her head. Feldeinsamkeit is dead. Strip the sheet from this emaciated corpse. She died young. . . .” The funeral comes next. Died: Clara Feldeinsamkeit, of a loss of blood. The corpse, corrupt, is hermetically sealed to prevent botulism. The horses are lashed, they gallop, an endless procession of galloping black horses. Farewell, Feldeinsamkeit! Up the vast pyramid of eternity you go, the rein-maned horses silhouetted galloping against the sky, hooves crashing against rock. Poise the coffin on the pinnacle—she is lost in the Feldewigkeit. . . . And Clara turns the page, sighing, looks at the clock, looks at her watch, and reads on. “Darling! Your violet eyes! Your eyes which are pools in which irises have been drowned! Speak to me! Tell me that it is not true, that it is only a hideous dream, a fearful nightmare! . . . Speak! . . . SPEAK! . . .” It was the bronzed young engineer who was thus imploring the heroine to speak. Ah—it was only too true. . . . Among the drowned irises something moved, it was there that the alligator had laid her eggs. The little alligators swarmed, grinning. . . . Bong, bong: half-past nine, and Clara, lifting her left leg off her right leg, and then the right leg onto the left leg, rustling, reads on. . . . And the star-spangled Lulu undulates in the purple and green light, undulates, oscillates, swaggles, singing, “The world goes round, to the sound, of a syncopated mellow-dee.” . . .

Rowe’s Wharf. The elevated was a fantastic structure of iron and snow. The taxi stood in the snow like a sinking ship—snowflakes swirled about it as Cleg-

horn fished out the dollar and a half for the driver. "Good night!" he shouted, and began plunging through drifts of slushy snow towards the brightly lighted Bar, before the steamed windows of which he could see that the sidewalk had been partially cleared and strewn with wet sawdust. The word Bar on the left window had lost its white enamel R, and become a bleat. Bar—bar—black sheep, come and have a pull. Yes, sir, yes, sir, three barrels full.

At the long bar of polished wood, on which at regular intervals were small potted palm trees, a straggling line of men leaned or stood in the various stages of lifting up or putting down their glasses, their feet on the railing, hats pushed back on backs of heads. At the farther end he could see Tom, shaking something in a cocktail shaker. He was talking, and shaking as he talked, and making, as he always did, a ritual of it: the glittering shaker was moved not only back and forth, but rose and fell in graceful curves from white stomach to blue chin, from blue chin to white stomach, twinkling. Moving nearer, he heard the cold rattle of the ice in it. And he saw that Tom was talking to Jerry Zimmerman, a disreputable young lawyer.

"Hello, Tom and Jerry!" he said, slapping Jerry on the back.

"Well, if it isn't old Charlie-horse," cried Jerry. Cleghorn shook hands solemnly with Tom.

"How're they hanging, Tom?"

"Oh, up and down, up and down," said Tom with a grin. "How is it by you?"



"Dry," said Cleghorn. "Let me have one of those, Tom. Well seasoned."

"Seasoned is the word."

"Have one, Jerry?"

"Don't mind if I do."

Tom produced a small flask from his hip pocket, seasoned the ginger ale, and they drank. "To crime," said Jerry. "Happy days," said Cleghorn, and gave a loud smack over the emptied glass. . . . "Another?" Jerry's dishonest face twinkled. "A hundred more," said Cleghorn. . . . Tom produced the flask again, extracted the loose cork with his teeth, poured the ginger ale, poured the whisky, smiled wearily. "It's a great life if you don't weaken," he murmured. "Snowing still?"

"Snowing like hell. Snowing like the devil. And I'm a long, long way from home."

"It's the wrong way to tickle Mary," said Jerry, swaying against the bar.

"Hello! I believe Jerry's got a little slant on!"

"He'd oughter have," said Tom, "the amount he carries. A regular watering cart."

Jerry beamed, dishonestly affectionate, subtly oscillating. "You said it, Tom. Strong waters run deep."

"Well, I'll soon be with you," said Cleghorn. "Wait for me there. Have another?"

"Now don't you tempt me, Charlie."

"No, I wouldn't think of it. Make it two, Tom."

Ten minutes later, Cleghorn felt the blood swarm suddenly against his temples, something changed in his

ears, and the whole hot smoky room seemed to be singing with a sound like telephone wires in a wind. He smiled at his glass.

"There's a wind blowing here," he said, "with furies in it."

"You don't say so," said Tom, wiping a glass. "There's a lot of them round this year. Good sized ones, too."

"From Brookline, I don't doubt. There's a funeral there today."

Jerry hiccoughed, candidly. Then, smiling loosely:

"A funeral? Who's dead?"

"Clara. . . . Feldeinsamkeit."

"Oh? Hup. No friend of mine. Never even heard of her."

"She died at curfew. Of botulism. I had a vision of it when I was in the taxi."

"Acute or chronic?"

"Acute."

"I hope she had an easy passage. Must be a rough night on the Styx."

"She gave her oath she'd never live again. Swore on the telephone directory."

Jerry closed his narrow eyes, rubbed his forehead.

"Something's wrong with me," he said. "I can't understand a word you're saying. What was that?"

"Acute bottleism," said Tom. "You've both got it."

"And the doctor was a brute," said Cleghorn. "Told the nurse to pull the pillow out from under her head! I distinctly heard him. And then they stripped the

sheet off. . . . Still, there was nothing left of her anyway."

"No, there wouldn't be," said Tom. "Them furies" (he winked at Jerry) "eat out a man from the inside, like. There's nothing will stop them once they get a hold of you. And they're particularly bad this winter. I hear they come from New Jersey."

"It's mosquitoes," said Jerry, pawing a vague foot vainly at the rail.

"Nothing left but the head, which was shining, but dimming, if you see what I mean, like a lamp going out. The doctor said something to her about her waning brain. When it went out, they had the funeral."

"As quick as that!" said Tom, laconically.

Jerry got his foot onto the rail. "I'm damned if I like this conversation," he said, and put the bottom of his empty glass against his forehead.

"Thousands of black horses. Millions of black horses. All galloping. Up the edge of a pyramid. They poised her coffin on the pinnacle; Mrs. Feldeinsamkeit."

"Was she a friend of yours?" Tom wiped the counter, lifting the glasses. He refilled the glasses, and Jerry put down a dollar and a half. Cleghorn smiled, pushing up his gray mustache towards his spectacles. He wagged a mysterious finger, leaning forward on the bar. His hat was over his left ear.

"Ah! Now you're asking a question. The question of questions. . . . Where's Jerry?"

"Here," said Jerry, disembodied, in a voice which

went round and round the room like a planet, whizzing and ringing.

"I thought you'd gone. . . . And I want you both to hear this: I want your advice."

"Good advice," murmured Tom, looking toward the other end of the room with a jaded eye, "is what I don't give nothing else except."

"This Feldeinsamkeit," pursued Cleghorn, confidently, "is really my wife."

Tom looked surprised.

"What!" he said.

"But she's not dead. Not yet."

"Not yet! . . ." Jerry set his glass down rather hard. "What's the idea?"

"Feldeinsamkeit is just a name I chose for her."

"An affectionate little nickname," said Tom.

"A disguise. . . . It means I want to kill her."

"Oh, is *that* all! Why didn't you say so?"

"It's what I've been telling you all this time, only you're so slow. . . ."

Cleghorn became morose. He looked down at his wet feet, which he saw standing all by themselves in wet sawdust. He felt baffled. There was something locked, which he couldn't open. He moved his right foot over a dead match. The idea went up like a kite, swooping, with a long tail of jingling sleigh bells, and darted out of sight.

"Yes: I'm going to do it tonight. A bath of blood. The hateful body must be deposed. Down with the digestive organs!"

Jerry gave a sudden whoop of laughter, stared, and gave another whoop.

"A padded cell," he said, "and meals in paper saucers, through a little window. . . . Ha, ha!"

"Don't be an idiot," said Cleghorn. Then he shouted: "Don't be an idiot!"

He became absorbed in a strange weaving and unweaving network of sounds, sounds which seemed to be visible as little shivering evanescent cords. The knots gleamed and dissolved. Jink—jink went the cash register. A lot of words were all spoken at once. Tom and Jerry were talking to each other very far away. Tom looked at him, then back at Jerry, shaking his head. "No!" said a voice. "I tell you—" said another. The front door opened, a draught came in, a man went out. Snow.

"I'll think I'll go out—" his own voice—"and stand on my head in the snow. Keep my hat."

He put his hat over his glass on the counter. Jerry took his arm.

"You stay here, Charlie. You're all right—I'll look after you."

"No!"

"Yes!"

Jerry was putting his hat back on his head, a little uncertainly. Cleghorn felt like crying.

"You're a good scout, Zimmerman, even if you *are* a crook."

"Sure I am. . . . You come along with me, now."

"I want to talk to Tom!" cried Cleghorn despair-

ingly. "I want to tell him about Lulu, star-spangled queen!"

"Tom'll wait for us."

"Sure I'll wait for you." Tom grinned, rattling his knuckles on the counter. "You just walk round the block."

. . . Outside, he tried to get away from Jerry's arm and slipped in the half-melted snow. They both floundered. He took a series of deep drinks of cold air, and the snowflakes, touching his cheeks and forehead, made him feel intelligent. He threw back his head and laughed.

"Drunk as a fish! But I'm beginning to feel sober now. . . . I understand everything."

"This air'll do us both good."

"Lots of air tonight, like sherbet. Have a quart, Jerry. Eat it. . . . Was that a clock striking?"

"No—signal on a ferryboat."

"I thought it was midnight—the beginning of my anniversary."

"What anniversary?"

Jerry spoke absent-mindedly—he was looking for a cab. Not a cab in sight. He dragged Cleghorn along towards the South Station, where there would be sure to be one. Cleghorn slipped again and lunged violently against him, gasping. The snow was beginning to stop.

"Wedding," said Cleghorn. "Married life—take my advice—don't ever marry!"

"I'm married already."

"Well, then, you fool, don't marry again. . . .



Where are we? On the Great White Way? Ha! I know. What we want to go to is No. 8,756,432 Infinity Street. Or minus seven Insanity Street. . . . One of those houses where cab drivers take you if you give them five dollars. . . . This isn't the way!"

"Don't be an ass, Charlie—come on!"

"Don't you call me an ass, you cheap shyster! . . . Where are we going?"

"If you don't shut up and behave yourself I'll leave you right here."

"Leave me, then! . . . Oh, God, how rotten I feel . . . like the bottom of a bird-cage."

They walked for several blocks in silence, plunging and slipping in the soft snow. Water dripped heavily from eaves, pitting the sodden white banks. Drops flashed slowly from rims of arc lamps. The ferries could be heard hooting in the harbor, and a train, casting brilliant lights on the snow, rattled along the elevated, rhythmically clanking.

"There's a cab," said Zimmerman. "Come on—make an effort. Farthest north."

They plunged across the wide square filled with brown slush. Cleghorn was half pushed, half lifted into the cab, and sank back on the seat. An effort, he thought, an effort. Zimmerman, outside, murmured something to the driver. Mumble, mumble. The driver took something out of his pocket and gave it to Zimmerman. . . . "Ta-ta!" shouted Zimmerman, but Cleghorn, staring, made no reply. Zimmerman vanished from the window, the dark world swirled, water

swashed, and Cleghorn shut his eyes. Zimmerman had gone. Where? Into the *Feldewigkeit*. . . . Surprising. . . . Gone down like a ship in a fog. . . . Clara *Feldewigkeit*, with violet eyes, bleeding to death, smiled while she read a magazine. She rustled and tinkled. "Why, Charlie! What *have* you—"

. . . He was suddenly aroused by the opening of the cab door. The driver was looking in at him.

"Here you are," he said—"want to get out?"

Cleghorn stared. It was his own house. It was dark—Clara had gone to bed. He let himself in and stood in the hall—not a sound. Removing his wet shoes he went softly up the stairs, holding to the banisters. Clara's door was shut. He went into his own room, undressed in the dark, and went to bed. Midnight began to strike on Clara's clock. . . . No, it wasn't a bell—it was the ringing, the clashing of hooves. A parade. A warm sunny day in spring. The escort came galloping first on black horses, their swords flashing. Then came a white horse. It was being ridden by a girl—but she was inclosed in a glass case which was strapped to the horse's back. Then he noticed that she was only a head and arms—she had no body. She wore an enormous wide-rimmed black hat, and her face was beautiful. Her arms were bare, and she held the reins in her hands. She looked neither to left nor right, the horse galloped, and she was gone. Farewell, *Feldeinsamkeit*.

## SOLILOQUY ON A PARK BENCH

THE model for the afternoon hour was an Italian boy—about her own age, she thought. His face had a heavy beauty, somber as that of the sleeping Medusa, particularly in profile; seen fully, it was a little stupid. But his torso was what most delighted her, and this she drew with careful strong strokes, luxuriating in a new sense of precision. Her pleasure in this was exquisite, was prolonged. "Extraordinary!" she murmured, and found herself oddly frowning at the dark beauty of the skin, the well-muscled shoulders, and arched ribs, in the April sunlight that slanted from the half-shaded window. She was sorry when the hour was over. Miss N, thrusting off her apron, paused beside her and asked if she were going "down town." She repressed a shade of annoyance—though she liked Miss N—and replied vaguely that she "had some things to do." This was not true, and she felt a slight contrition when she saw that Miss N was unconvinced and a little hurt. However! . . . She put on her hat and escaped into the soft afternoon.

The parkway invited her—it was vague, it was hazily green with new leaves and buds, the muddy river gleamed sleepily here and there as it curved among flat gardens and under small stone arches, and the drowsy quackings and laconic comments of water fowls seemed

only to add to the immense and melancholy stillness. She caressed affectionately, with a fugitive hand, as she walked, the low stone wall that led to a ridiculously conceited little bridge. She slid two fingers over the white flank of a birch. Further on, she touched her palm, and scratched it, against a barberry frond, on which two elfin red peppers still hung. . . . Why had she rebuffed Miss N? . . . Well, really, one wanted, sometimes, to be alone. Particularly when one was—what? . . . Her eyes wandered from the word, she paused to watch a duck stand on his head in the still water, and then walked on absorbed. The benches here were too crowded. A nursemaid scolded a child, lifting an angry round eye from her knitting. A small boy was digging in the gravel with a bit of broken glass, murmuring, "It's like this—it's like this." A bored perfumed lady waited patiently for her Pomeranian, which suddenly twinkled after her as if on wire springs. . . . The bells in St. Matthew's Church began striking five, and it seemed to her that the slow deep tones hung afterwards among the trees and over the water like a mist. White and purple crocuses were sunning themselves in a corner by a wall—absurd! She felt suddenly like laughing at everything, and then, just as suddenly, for no reason, felt unhappy, as if she had a bird shut in her heart who wanted to escape. She found a deserted bench and sat down, at the end nearest the water. Grackles made scraping sounds in the maple tree over her head—scolding at sparrows. Cruel birds, grackles! . . . Who was it that had told her of

seeing a grackle pursue a sparrow tirelessly until he had worn it out, and then stab it to death on the ground? . . . How horrible, and in April. . . . There was a grackle now. He walked awkwardly by the water's edge—a bedraggled fellow, getting on in years, but what a beautiful iridescence on his black feathers! . . . It was Fred Thomas who had told her. He always came out to smoke his pipe here after lunch. A curious, nice thing for a man to do, an unexpected concession—as if the grackle should pause and admire a crocus! She laughed to herself, and half shut her eyes to make a picture of the water, with a round cold cloud in it, and part of the stone arch of a bridge.

It was while she was doing this that a young man walked slowly between her and the dim picture, looking down at her intently. She felt ridiculous. She became aware, after he had passed, that she had gone on screwing up her eyes without the slightest notion of what she was looking at. She relaxed her forehead, and turned to glance after him: to her surprise he also had turned, and was irresolutely coming back, still staring. In fact, he came and sat down at the other end of the bench. He was pale, his clothes were slightly shabby, his mouth was oddly pursed, one of his eyebrows twitched. She averted her eyes quickly. . . . How very curious! She felt flushed and confused, and after a second, during which she had ridiculously held her breath, she could hear her excited brain going through a preposterous rigmarole of its own: "Grackle under a white cloud—muddy water—grackle, grackle—

muddy water—it's ferocious, simply ferocious." . . . He was going to speak to her—but of course she would ignore him—of course, of course. She crossed her knees with exquisite conscious leisureliness, and smoothed her skirt as if to say, "Young man, you simply don't exist!" But no: it hadn't been emphatic enough. She assumed an expression studiously indifferent, even hostile, and stared superciliously at the water. She glanced to the right, at a small girl propelling a velocipede, toes blandly turned out. She looked past him, to the left—examined witheringly the bare boughs of an elm tree. At that instant, unfortunately, he struck a match, and startled her into looking too abruptly away again. A cloud of cigarette smoke drifted warmly over her, the bench shook under his shift of posture, agreeably stirring her spine, and low words followed the smoke.

"Nice afternoon, isn't it?"

She ignored him, allowing her eyes to follow blindly a passing pedestrian. . . . So this is how it's done. . . . Prelude to the afternoon of a faun. . . . More cigarette smoke, another tremble of the bench. . . . Her heart beat violently, she seemed to have a red cloud before her eyes.

"Would you like to go to a movie? . . . Be a sport."

She had an acute desire to reply—"But I'm not a 'sport'"—but she was silent. Several people passed, and she was embarrassed by perceiving that when she shifted her head to look at them, now to the right, now to the left, he did likewise, as if they were in concert.



She turned her back towards him, but not too aggressively.

"You don't mind my talking to you, do you? . . . No harm in talking, is there? . . . I haven't talked to anybody all day. . . . If you're a stranger in a town you don't find anybody to talk to. You can't stop a cop and talk to him, can you? . . . On a train it's different. You can almost always talk with the man sitting next to you, or get a game of cards. You look out the window and say, 'I wonder what they're building there?' And that's all there is to it. . . . But it's hard getting to talk with a woman, unless she's old. . . . You offer her a newspaper or a magazine, and she says, 'No, thank you' in a tone as if you'd insulted her. . . . And if you're a stranger in a town, how are you going to meet any girls? That's why, when I saw you here, I thought I'd try talking to you, just as if I knew you. You don't mind, do you?"

He paused, puffed at his cigarette, looked at her (she knew) beseechingly. How quickly, if she responded, he would drop the beseeching and become proprietary! . . . She hoped nobody she knew would come along. Awkward. . . . But of course she was paying no attention to him. She felt perfectly indifferent, and, for no reason, extraordinarily happy.

"Look at that duck—isn't he comical! Funny beady eyes they have. . . . Last week I went out on the Concord River in a canoe. Did you ever go out there? . . . Lots of ducks and turtles and muskrats. . . . It's great. After a mile or two you don't meet a soul—

nothing but water and trees, burnt willow stumps in the water, bushes in the water, red-winged blackbirds in the bushes. . . . I spread my coat out and the wind carried me for a long way. When I got hungry, I went ashore and ate a lunch. Oh, say, didn't I get scratched in the bull briars! They were a caution. . . . All the same, it would have been nice if I'd had somebody to talk to. . . . It's not much fun going to places if you're alone—"

A man and woman went by, preoccupied. The woman was saying, "Well, he got a broken leg, that's what he got, didn't he?" The man walked grimly, his eyes on the ground.

"How would you like to go there next Sunday? . . . We could take some sandwiches and a couple of bottles of ginger ale. . . . It's pretty scenery. . . . One place, I saw last year, there was a big sloping field full of tall asparagus—all feathery, you know—and a man driving a white horse through it, cultivating it. The horse looked as if he were half lost in a green fog. . . . It was like a picture. . . . Sometimes you find a canoe pulled up among trees and bushes in a quiet spot, and a man and girl having a pretty good time. . . . Maybe you've been up there? . . . Maybe you don't like the country much? . . . How would you like to go to a movie? There's a good one a little way from here—swell music. I go there once in a while. I like to be in a crowd of people like that, in the dark, and hear them all laughing—did you ever notice that? The way the laugh goes all over the house. . . . Well, it's a

rest after you've been running a linotype all day—believe me! . . . Last night I dreamt I went to a movie, all dark, full of rows and rows of people who looked at me and smiled, and a girl I had never seen before said, 'Why, hello, Charlie!' (that's my name). I put my hand on her knee, and then I woke up! . . . Gee, I felt sad, as if I'd lost my best friend."

Quack, quack. A duck swam along, followed by a flotilla of industrious ducklings. The sky was beginning to turn pink.

"Won't you tell me your name? . . . Come and have supper with me. . . . I know a Chinese place—the tables have marble tops and carved legs. Then we could go to a movie. I won't bother you—all I want is somebody to talk to. Have supper, and then, if you want, you can leave me . . . or, if you want, we can go to a movie. . . . It's nice to sit close together—you know what I mean? I like to feel a girl's shoulder against mine, moving when she breathes. Why is it it feels so good? You feel happy all over, as if you were melting, and then you touch each other's hands—"

. . . She got up suddenly, trembling all over, without having been aware of any decision to go, and walked rapidly away. For a moment he did not follow, but then she was aware, half turning her head, that he had risen and had begun to walk after her, but with the same odd irresolute step with which he had first approached her. She quickened her pace, her heart beating. She had a strange pulsing pain in the side of her throat. When she had turned the corner she ran and

barely caught a street car which had stopped there. She looked back and saw him standing at the corner, foolish and pathetic. Then he turned aimlessly back towards the parkway.

All the way home in the street car she felt extraordinarily confused, ecstatic, and at the same time ashamed. She wanted to hear music, to dance, to draw pictures—pictures full of darkness and depth, with pointed lights and dim people moving among trees hung with lanterns. She thought of the river, as he had described it. That had been delicious—especially the white horse in the mist of asparagus. She thought of the marble-topped tables, Chinamen, carved legs, and the girl who said, "Why, hello, Charlie!" . . . When she got to the boarding house she found that her sister had left a message, saying that she would not be home till late in the evening. . . . Good! . . . She ate her supper without talking to anybody, and then, feeling excited and happy, went out.

She walked, without apparent aim, towards the more crowded streets, where the lights were brightest and the sound of the idle stream of people loudest. Everybody wanted to be gay. But she was getting tired, she couldn't walk about like this all evening—What should she do? A movie sign caught her eye. Ah! . . . She was given a seat between two men, both of whom looked at her with interest. An orchestra was playing loudly, the great shaft of light poured down to the screen over the dark rows of people. It was full of narrow rays, crossing and recrossing one another. A

laugh began somewhere and ran irregularly over the house, gathering volume, then died away. She sank back in her chair, sighing. Her shoulder touched the shoulder of the man at her right, and she quickly withdrew it, and began, for some reason, to tremble violently.

THE END







OCT 2 1970

UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG LIBRARY



3 1888 007 940 860